

The Pros and Cons of Online Volunteering: a Case for Accessibility

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Volunteering - the online sector

Online volunteering is facilitated by the ease of information exchange that is granted by the internet, and in turn, the internet helps to facilitate a diverse realm of volunteering activities and methods. The Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) currently has a useful set of guidelines for organisations planning to utilise online volunteering [available here](#), and CEV advocated for online volunteering as a key component of the 'Stop loneliness, Start volunteering program.'

Online volunteering, sometimes known as virtual or e-volunteering, has emerged as a significant trend in the 21st century. With the rapid progression of digital technology and the proliferation of the internet, volunteering is no longer confined to face-to-face activities. Online volunteering allows individuals to contribute their time and skills remotely to benefit organisations and causes that they care about.

Online volunteering can encompass a variety of activities, including but not limited to, web design, translation, mentoring, research, data analysis, content creation, and social media management. It offers flexibility and convenience, as volunteers can participate from almost anywhere in the world and can choose when they wish to take part. This form of volunteering is particularly beneficial for individuals with restricted mobility, limited transportation, or those living in remote areas.

In light of recent global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, online volunteering has seen a surge in participation. As a result, online volunteering has become an increasingly integral part of the volunteering landscape, and it is likely to continue to grow in the future. The real question is whether the increasing digitalisation of volunteering could become a tool to decrease disparity and improve the accessibility of volunteering? While there are inherent complexities, the internet holds the potential to broaden the scope of volunteering. However, a concern arises regarding the unequal access to digital technologies, or the risk of organisations shifting too many volunteering activities online, beyond what is truly necessary and potentially excluding those without access to such resources.



The many manifestations of online volunteering

Online volunteering, also known as virtual volunteering, involves tasks completed, either wholly or partially via the internet. It is used in a variety of ways to fulfil different needs within organisations. Some key forms include:

1. **Skills-based volunteering:** many organisations leverage online volunteering to tap into specialised skills that their existing team may lack. This can include things like web design, graphic design, copywriting, translation, programming, and more. The flexibility of online volunteering allows skilled professionals to donate their expertise without having to commit to regular, in-person volunteer activities (Cravens, J., et al. (2014).
2. **Mentoring and teaching:** online volunteering can facilitate mentorship programs, teaching or tutoring in various subjects. For example, volunteers might help students with homework, mentor young professionals in their career field, or run virtual workshops on topics of expertise (Liu, H. K., et al, 2016).
3. **Research and data analysis:** some organisations, particularly those in scientific or academic fields, use online volunteers to help with research projects. This can involve data collection, data analysis, or participation in citizen science projects (Cox, J., et al, 2015).
4. **Virtual activism:** online volunteering can also play a role in advocacy and activism. This might involve running social media campaigns, writing blog posts or op-eds, contacting policy makers, or other activities aimed at driving social or political change (Joyce, 2010).
5. **Crowdsourcing solutions:** online volunteers can help organisations solve complex problems through crowdsourcing, this involves gathering ideas, feedback, or solutions from a large group of people. (Brabham, D. C. 2013.) It can also be used to collect resources and raise funds and gives the organisation access to a wider set of expertise at a faster pace and at a lower cost than conventional routes.

The nature and scope of online volunteering can vary widely based on the needs of the organisation or initiative and the skills and interests of the volunteers. It offers a flexible and accessible way for individuals to contribute to causes they care about and for organisations to access a broader pool of talent and skills, this flexibility is part of its appeal, yet it's crucial for each organisation to adopt the volunteering approach that will best serve its purpose. For example, online volunteering can provide valuable skills and expertise to organisations, especially in areas like digital marketing, web development, or data analysis. Skill-based volunteering matches professional skills with specific organisational needs, offering significant advantages to nonprofits by leveraging specialised expertise. In contrast, episodic volunteering, where individuals contribute periodically, is excellent for short-term projects or events. In essence, each form of volunteering can be tailored to an organisation's specific needs and provides their own unique benefits.

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Online volunteering in the European Union:

Online volunteering is becoming more and more popular worldwide, including in the European Union. Here are several examples of online volunteering opportunities that operate in the European Union:

- United Nations Volunteers (UNV): the UNV hosts an online volunteering platform where organisations post volunteer opportunities. There are often numerous EU-based projects listed, especially in areas like writing, translation, and project management.

<https://www.unv.org/>

- e-wolontariat - Translating to “e-volunteering”, it serves as a matching service for online volunteers and organisations in Poland, e-wolontariat also involves online volunteers in its operation.

<https://e-wolontariat.pl/projekty/>

- Ciber Voluntarios: a Spain-based project related to computer and digital technologies and volunteering, which utilises both in-person and online volunteers to run.

<https://www.cibervoluntarios.org/es/haz-voluntariado>

- Translators Without Borders: this organisation often seeks volunteers who can translate, interpret, or proofread documents for humanitarian and development organisations worldwide. With the many languages spoken in the EU, European volunteers form a large part of this initiative.

<https://translatorswithoutborders.org/>

- Zooniverse: this platform enables people to contribute to research projects by doing tasks like beta testing or project moderating in a variety of subjects spanning from literature to physics.

<https://www.zooniverse.org/>

- Amnesty International Decoders: this initiative by Amnesty International involves volunteers from around the world, including the EU, who analyse and decode information related to human rights abuses.

<https://decoders.amnesty.org/>

- Be My Eyes: launched with the aim to create a more accessible world for visually impaired individuals, it utilises an app to help users with everyday tasks. Users request assistance through the app and it connects the user with a sighted volunteer who can assist them via video call.

<https://www.bemyeyes.com/>

Many opportunities do not operate wholly on the European level, and either function globally or often just on a nationwide basis, sometimes due to language limitations but also because of a lack of international cooperation. An important component of this is the lack of collaborative building from EU institutions, which could facilitate the creation and sustainability of more EU-level projects. The non-profit sector would benefit from having more international European virtual volunteer networks and some increased collaboration, coordination and motivation would facilitate this to happen.

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Overview of the history of online volunteering and its development, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

Online volunteering has a history stemming from the early days of the internet. The exact origins are hard to pinpoint, but it's generally agreed that online volunteering started to take place in the 1990s, and took off more in the 2000s as more people gained access to the internet.

The early days (late 1990s - early 2000s): the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program launched one of the first major online volunteering services in 2000, originally as part of NetAid, and it allowed NGOs, government bodies, and other agencies to recruit volunteers online. In the early days, much of online volunteering was about leveraging professional skills, such as website design, translation, writing, or research (Web.archive.org, 2016.).

The growth phase (mid 2000s - 2010s): with the rise of Web 2.0, social media, and faster internet connections, online volunteering began to diversify and expand. It began including things like mentoring, teaching, and even virtual activism. These advancements facilitated new forms of e-volunteering as faster communication and the advent of smartphones allowed people to be able to carry out activities instantaneously.

The COVID-19 era (2020 - present): the COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in online volunteering due to the lockdown measures and social distancing guidelines. As physical volunteering opportunities were limited, organisations began seeking out more online volunteers, and people started looking for ways to give back while staying safe at home. Not only did existing online volunteering grow, but many organisations that had previously not engaged online volunteers started to do so. Platforms such as Zooniverse, Catchafire, and many others saw an increase in activity during this period. A study in the UK showed that 92% of the organisations surveyed had moved services online in 2019-20 as a result of the pandemic as well as an increase in the number of volunteer roles being carried out remotely in 39% of organisations (NCVO, 2020.)

While COVID-19 accelerated the trend of online volunteering, the groundwork had been laid by years of technological advancements, increasing internet accessibility, and a growing recognition of the value of online volunteering. In a post-COVID world, this trend will likely continue as the benefits of online volunteering are recognised by more and more organisations looking for people and individuals seeking to volunteer. Since COVID there has been a significant increase in the number of events and activities that have become solely virtually accessible or hybrid remote and in-person events, and this seems to be a trend that has stayed as people adjusted to the inability to travel and given the increasing drive towards limiting climate-damaging travel emissions. This increased adaptability of organisations points to the potential for many more opportunities becoming available as the sector develops and evolves with these new trends.

Improving recognition of online volunteering

Online volunteering is a less conventional route in volunteering and subsequently, the recognition and validation of online volunteers could be a potential issue. While such efforts may not come with traditional organisational structures or formal recognition mechanisms, there are several ways to appreciate online volunteers. One approach is to celebrate their impact by sharing success stories and outcomes publicly, highlighting the real-world difference they make. Additionally, providing opportunities for online volunteers to network and connect with like-minded individuals could help to foster a sense of community and belonging. Creating spaces where volunteers can showcase their skills, gain new ones, and receive mentorship or feedback can also contribute to their recognition and personal growth. Ultimately, acknowledging the dedication and passion of online volunteers and expressing gratitude for their contributions can go a long way in valuing their vital role in driving positive change. An important component of recognising the value of volunteers is through the validation of learning and skills gained through volunteering. The skills and knowledge acquired through volunteering can be formalised using instruments such as Youthpass or Destination eValidation (DesTeVa), the latter option provides a useful online tool that may also be useful to informal volunteers common in online volunteering. However, to be truly meaningful as a form of validation, these instruments, and the value of online volunteering needs to be understood and appreciated by employers, which highlights that this issue is something which needs the input of different stakeholders, not only volunteering organisations.

Advantages of online volunteering

Volunteering not only benefits the recipients of these acts of service, but it also provides numerous benefits to the volunteers themselves. These benefits include personal growth, the development of new skills, increased social connections, and the emotional satisfaction derived from helping others. Volunteering can also contribute to career development, as it allows individuals to gain experience, network in their fields of interest, and potentially explore new career paths. The improved accessibility of e-volunteering extends these benefits to communities who are unable to partake in face-to-face volunteering opportunities. These communities can include people living in rural areas, people who work long hours and people with disabilities.

There are several key advantages associated with online volunteering, not only for the volunteers themselves but also for the organisations they serve. Here are some:

- **Accessibility:** online volunteering is open to a wide range of individuals, regardless of their geographical location, mobility, or schedule. This kind of volunteering breaks down the barriers that may prevent individuals from participating in traditional volunteering (Cravens, 2014).
- **Flexibility:** with online volunteering, individuals can often set their hours, making it an

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- excellent option for those with full-time jobs, students, or those with family obligations. Volunteers can often contribute at any time that suits them, rather than being restricted to specific working hours. (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008).
- Broaden skill sets and experience: online volunteering provides individuals with an opportunity to gain new skills or enhance existing ones, which can boost their resumes. Depending on the role, volunteers can develop skills in areas such as project management, communication, graphic design, or social media management (Binder, M., 2014).
- Community building: online volunteering fosters a sense of community and connectedness, even if the volunteers are scattered across the globe. It allows people to connect with others who share their interests or values.
- Low costs: for organisations, online volunteering can also reduce costs associated with things like office space, utilities, or equipment, as volunteers use their resources.
- Increased capacity: through online volunteering, organisations can tap into a global pool of talent and thus significantly increase their capacity to deliver on their mission (Cravens, J., & Ellis, S. J. 2014).
- Environmental impact: as there is no need for commuting, online volunteering reduces carbon emissions and hence is more environmentally friendly.

Accessibility is a cornerstone advantage of online volunteering because it offers significant benefits to organisations and participating individuals alike. It broadens the talent pool, allowing organisations to tap into a global array of skills and expertise. This increased diversity and accessibility can lead to more innovative problem-solving and a broader reach for the organisation's mission. Additionally, the communities that can form around online volunteering can serve as hubs for collaboration and advocacy. They have the potential to evolve into bigger and more influential networks that foster collective action and international cooperation on specific topics, driving positive change on a global scale. These communities could transcend geographic boundaries, leverage diverse perspectives, and unite like-minded individuals to address critical issues effectively. Overall, the many advantages to online volunteering, combined with its cheap running costs and increasing recognition will make online volunteering a growing trend for non-profit organisations around the globe.

Potential advantages of online volunteering and their relevance to people with disabilities

Volunteering provides benefits for the volunteer such as the development of skills and networking, these are not specific to people with disabilities, the key point is that online volunteering offers an inclusive environment where these advantages can be accessible to everyone, regardless of their abilities. However, individuals with disabilities may particularly benefit from these advantages as they can sometimes face additional barriers to in-person volunteering, equally, in many cases these people could benefit the most from what volunteering can offer volunteers.

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Despite the often high motivation to volunteer, these barriers are a factor in the relatively lower percentage of people with disabilities who are volunteering, representing a huge missed opportunity to make use of and harness this motivation and energy. According to research from the Scottish Government, personal barriers such as self-confidence or negative stereotypes were widely reported as common barriers among people with disabilities (Scottish Government, 2019). In light of this, online volunteering can act as a way for these people to try volunteering in a safe environment and build self-confidence before possibly engaging with in-person volunteering.

Skill development and confidence building: engaging in online volunteering can provide individuals with disabilities with opportunities to develop and refine their skills in various areas. By participating in tasks such as writing, research, graphic design, or online advocacy, they can develop their skills and gain confidence in their capabilities. This can lead to increased self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment (Binder, 2014.), which is a particular issue among people with disabilities, who often face lower self-confidence, and are offered fewer chances to build on this because of negative stereotypes or a lack of understanding or stigma on the side of organisations regarding volunteers with disabilities. A potential issue on this topic is the validation of learning, but organisations can introduce standardised recognition mechanisms such as digital badges or certificates, guide volunteers in creating digital portfolios, and offer personalised reference letters based on their contributions. Collaboration with educational institutions for academic credit, mentorship on presenting online volunteering experiences, and advocating for the recognition of virtual volunteering are also potential alternative solutions.

Social connection and networking: online volunteering often involves collaboration and interaction with people from diverse backgrounds and locations. It allows individuals with disabilities to connect with like-minded individuals, build relationships, and expand their social networks (Linning and Jackson, 2018). This is particularly significant as research suggests that people with disabilities experience social isolation at significantly higher rates than people without disabilities (Emerson et al, 2020). Online platforms and virtual communities can be used for people to engage in meaningful discussions, exchange ideas, and foster connections with people who share their passions and interests.

Increased accessibility: Online volunteering eliminates many of the physical barriers that can hinder participation for individuals with disabilities. It provides an opportunity to be able to contribute their skills and expertise without the requirement for physical mobility or specific accommodation. By engaging in virtual volunteering, individuals with disabilities can overcome transportation challenges, inaccessible physical environments, and other physical limitations imposed by their disabilities.

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Flexibility: online volunteering often provides greater flexibility in terms of scheduling and time commitment. This is especially beneficial for individuals with disabilities who may have fluctuating energy levels or varying abilities. They can choose assignments or tasks that align with their capabilities and work at their own pace, allowing for a more manageable and accessible volunteering experience.

Increased inclusion and equal opportunities: Online volunteering promotes inclusivity by providing individuals with disabilities with equal opportunities to contribute and make a difference. It allows individuals to participate in various projects, campaigns, and initiatives without being limited by physical barriers. Online platforms enable individuals to utilise their talents, skills, and expertise on a level playing field, which could help promote the visibility of people with disabilities in society, but it is crucial that the organisations highlight volunteers' achievements on their websites and social media, while volunteers can share their experiences and impact on personal platforms.

Some of these benefits are specific to those with disabilities, a key advantage is that it offers an alternative for those who, for various reasons, cannot engage in traditional, in-person volunteering. This means that they can benefit from the advantages associated with being a volunteer, such as improved mental health (Binder, 2014), improved community wellbeing and less social isolation (Linning, M. and Jackson, 2018)

Potential drawbacks

- **Digital divide:** not everyone has equal access to the necessary technology or a stable internet connection to participate in online volunteering (Koss, 2001). This could create an unfair gap between those who can volunteer online and those who can't, particularly with consideration of those with disabilities as they are often less likely to have access to digital devices (World Economic Forum, 2021.)
- **Digital skills divide:** there is also a gap between people's proficiency in using digital technologies which is exacerbated by intergenerational differences, where older individuals often have less familiarity with online tools and platforms. Moreover, regional disparities within Europe are pronounced, with rural areas typically lacking the more robust digital infrastructure available in urban centres. Those lacking digital skills and access may face significant barriers to online volunteer opportunities, hindering their potential for personal and economic development. This inequality can deepen existing social and economic disparities, posing challenges for individuals and communities striving to overcome poverty and social exclusion, which can in turn exacerbate the poverty gap.

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- Isolation: although online volunteering can provide a sense of community, it may also lack the personal connection and immediate feedback that face-to-face volunteering provides. Some volunteers may feel isolated or disconnected from the organisation and its mission. (Lup, D. and Booth, J.E.2018.) This isolation can affect individuals by potentially reducing their sense of belonging and connection to the cause, impacting their overall motivation as volunteers. Moreover, a lack of interpersonal communication can sometimes hinder the volunteer's ability to fully understand the organisation's goals and activities, leading to a less effective contribution. There may also be extra difficulty in building a peer network with other volunteers and may leave some feeling potentially excluded or somehow lesser than the in-person volunteers. Conversely, for the organisation, this isolation can result in challenges in terms of volunteer engagement and communication, potentially affecting the overall success of their initiatives.
- Lack of support: without in-person contact, it may be challenging to provide timely and effective support to volunteers. This could lead to volunteers feeling unsupported or unsure of their roles and requires organisations to take responsibility to properly train and support their volunteers, as well as training their volunteer managers to operate virtually. Without this training and concentrated support, organisations may be less able to realise and intervene when an issue arises.
- Privacy concerns: When volunteering online, especially for roles that require handling sensitive information, there may be concerns about privacy and data security. It's critical that organisations take measures to protect the information they share with online volunteers, and abide by the data protection regulations outlined in the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- Time management: With the flexibility of online volunteering, it might be challenging for some volunteers to manage their time effectively and stay disciplined without a fixed schedule or direct supervision (Rehberg, 2005). Volunteering online requires a high level of self-discipline and organisation from volunteers. The absence of physical constraints and structured schedules can sometimes lead to challenges in balancing volunteer activities with other commitments. On the other hand, this can create issues for the organisation, who are less able to plan and account for volunteers who are maybe less committed or consistent.

In addition to these disadvantages, it's crucial to consider the potential setbacks specific to individuals with disabilities. These include a lack of adapted online platforms that may not fully cater to the needs of people relying on screen readers voice recognition software, or other assistive technologies, thereby creating participation barriers.

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Also, some online volunteer opportunities may not be thoughtfully designed to accommodate the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities, thereby limiting their options for engagement. Additionally, online volunteering, like remote work, can sometimes contribute to feelings of isolation or loneliness, which can be particularly challenging for individuals with mental health disabilities. Maintaining a sense of social connection is fundamental and something that must be addressed by the organisation. Furthermore, there is the potential that people with disabilities become pigeonholed into online volunteering rather because it is seen as 'easier' than the organisation taking accountability to make themselves more accessible, which could not only create a "second tier" of volunteer but could exacerbate the isolation point. Addressing these setbacks is crucial for making online volunteering more inclusive and accessible for everyone.

Addressing the issues

Some of these disadvantages can be mitigated through proper planning and support from the organisation. For example, the isolation of online volunteers can be mitigated by creating a sense of community to help volunteers stay connected and engaged. Organisations can create virtual communities and forums where volunteers can connect and build a sense of belonging, alongside regular communication, mentorship, and provide feedback that can help volunteers feel supported and valued. Additionally, encouraging virtual teamwork and inclusive online events can foster a sense of collaboration and interaction. Although setting up a dedicated forum might not be feasible for smaller projects, imaginative low-cost solutions can also be employed, such as a whatsapp group for volunteers or using peer-led approaches, etcetera. Furthermore, maintaining a feedback loop for volunteer input and acting on their suggestions can enhance the overall volunteer experience, ensuring that both volunteers and organisations benefit from online volunteering while minimising isolation. This point is amplified when considered in the context of volunteers with disabilities, who could offer invaluable feedback on accessible activity design for example. Moreover, organisations must ensure that their volunteers feel supported which they can achieve through comprehensive onboarding processes, clear project guidelines, and accessible support channels. Regular check-ins with volunteers, mentoring programs, and an accessible point of contact for questions can help bridge the support gap and help volunteers to feel confident, and capable in their roles, ultimately enhancing the success of their contributions.

Concluding remarks

Overall, there has been significant developments in the role of online volunteering in recent years, and this method of volunteering will continue to grow and manifest itself in new ways as people find new ways to use the internet to fit volunteering into modern-day life. This has indicated some exciting benefits and new possibilities, especially for people with disabilities, and in the future online volunteering will continue to change and evolve to fit the needs of people with disabilities as society becomes more accessible and adaptable. New opportunities for people with disabilities and other communities with difficulties with in-person volunteering, means that more people can reap the benefits of becoming a volunteer, in addition to the people benefitting from the outcomes of the volunteering as well. Online volunteering is one of the many ways that individuals with disabilities can get involved with volunteering and can provide a viable option for anyone who wants access to volunteering from their own home, but should not be the de-facto option for people with disabilities, as it may not best suit their needs and interests. Concerning the future of online volunteering, it is indispensable that organisations maintain strong support systems for volunteers, and try to maintain a community feel through team events and sessions.

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