

Virtual Volunteerism *Making it easier to volunteer any time, anywhere!*

There's a lot of talk today about virtual reality. But what about virtual volunteering? What does that mean? Although the word "virtual" means "almost, near or approximating", virtual volunteering is an actual way to volunteer through your computer.

Virtual volunteering, also known as "online volunteering" provides access to people who couldn't volunteer otherwise, due to time availability, transportation or even health issues. Companies like virtual volunteering because employees can stay onsite, but still make a difference during their "down time". You can set your own scheduled and work at the times of day or night that are most convenient for you. And people can help people all across the world, without having to pay to travel to or stay in those locations.

According to "The Virtual Volunteering Project", online volunteers range in age from 14 to 75 years old. Younger volunteers seem to like online volunteering because there is no prohibitions against involving anyone under 18 in volunteer projects, or because they had no transportation to an on-site volunteer assignment. And, although there seems to be an even split between men and women volunteering online, nearly 60% of the online population was identified as of Anglo/European descent.

Online volunteers can do any kind of work that can be done on a computer and sent over the Internet. Some common types of online volunteering include:

- Developing a brochure for a nonprofit organization
- Providing written translation services
- Providing technical assistance which nonprofit staff may lack the time or expertise to handle (ie., provide input on health related issues that impact the implementation of water/sanitation initiatives in East Africa)
- Conducting online research to help an organization solve a particular problem or discover trends with
- Design a website for a nonprofit

Some nonprofit agencies are filling their traditional volunteer needs through untraditional methods, such as online volunteering. For example, mentors and tutors are becoming harder to find for organizations like Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Nationwide, these organizations are filling in some of their gaps by having people establish e-mentoring relationships with children or adults. These organizations still need to screen their potential volunteers, but it can be a great way to build community connections if there aren't enough traditional volunteers available. Another less traditional way to volunteer online is to facilitate a support group through the Internet.

There are some considerations you must fulfill before becoming an online volunteer. These include:

- Regular access to the Internet and your own email account
 - Self-motivation and ability to work without supervision
 - Attention to deadlines
 - Confidence that you have time to volunteer
- For more information about virtual volunteering or learn about online volunteer

opportunities, visit www.netaid.org or www.cypbervpm.com.

This article is part of a series of columns on the topic of volunteer management and volunteer related stories, written by the Volunteer Center of Rhode Island. For more information, visit our website at www.vcri.org or contact Kelly Nevins at (401) 421-6547, ext.105 or e-mail knevins@vcri.org.