



Do you want to volunteer but find just getting to an assignment eats up your available time? Are fuel costs prohibitive, parking either nonexistent or too expensive, and public transportation unavailable? And even if all those problems could be resolved, do you feel the pollution you generate to get there offsets the good you do? Do you find your time to volunteer (late night, weekends, etc.) doesn't coincide with the available opportunities? Do you need to stay at HOME to take care of your children or elderly relatives, or because of your own mobility constraints? Would you like to volunteer for an organization based far from you, but you don't know how to bridge the distance? And considering that as a reader of HOME, you may be of Lebanese heritage, would you like to volunteer for a Lebanon-based organization from your own HOME in Australia or Colombia or somewhere else in Lebanon's vast diaspora?

If you have nodded your head to any of these questions, consider virtual volunteering.



What is virtual volunteering?

Virtual volunteering is a service provided to a nonprofit organization, school, government office or other agency by volunteers partially or fully through the internet, whether on a computer, tablet, smartphone or other digital device. Other names for virtual volunteering include online volunteering, remote volunteering, e-volunteering, digital volunteering and cyber service, along with terms specific to the task being done like telementoring and teletutoring.

Virtual volunteering not only helps people participate in volunteer opportunities they can't attend in person, but it is also good for the organizations they serve. It saves them the cost of providing transportation, equipment, supplies and office space for the volunteer while expanding the pool of potential volunteers to virtually anyone in the world who has both access to the internet and the interest, skills and expertise they need. It allows organizations to engage volunteers whose available hours to volunteer do not fit the work hours of the organization, or who need equipment the organization can't afford but is otherwise accessible to the volunteer. And it expands the scope of an organization's outreach, making its impact more scalable.

It is important to note that virtual volunteering is not about how the internet can facilitate all types of volunteering. Organizations can provide information on their websites and Facebook pages about their volunteer programs, list their volunteer opportunities and provide coverage of

their volunteer achievements. They can post volunteer applications (either to fill in online or download, complete and email back) and online questionnaires, evaluations, resources, scheduling and training for their volunteers, as well as online programs that track volunteers.

They can use all sorts of social media like Twitter and Instagram to recruit, communicate and send out volunteer alerts. These are digital aspects of volunteer management, but they are not, in themselves, virtual volunteering. Virtual volunteering is about how the volunteer contributes to the mission of the organization, not about how the volunteer is recruited and managed.

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When skilled, passionate individuals join forces online with great organizations working toward sustainable development goals, everyone wins.

— U.N. Online Volunteering Website

When did virtual volunteering start?

One might expect that virtual volunteering started after the first internet service provider companies were formed in the late 1980s. But the first virtual volunteer project is believed to be Project Gutenberg (<https://www.gutenberg.org/>), founded in 1971 when internet was only available to universities and the military. The objective of the project was to digitize and archive books in the public domain so they would be available for free or minimal cost to everyone. Virtual volunteers typed in the texts word by word until 1989, when the technology was developed to scan text. Over 54,000 books are now available for free because of the efforts of those virtual volunteers.

Other virtual volunteering efforts followed, facilitated by the advent of

internet service providers (1980s), and browsers and search engines (1990s).

Virtual volunteering was formally included within the professional parameters of volunteer management in 1996, when Jayne Cravens and Susan Ellis, both internationally recognized specialists in volunteerism, embarked on Impact Online's Virtual Volunteering Project. Impact Online is an American nonprofit organization that uses the internet to make it easier for people to find good causes. Cravens and Ellis researched more than 100 organizations involving online volunteers to document the benefits of online service for agencies, volunteers and audiences served, and shared ways agencies can incorporate virtual volunteering into their organizations.

What can a virtual volunteer do?

The short answer is anything that can be transmitted over the internet.

Virtual volunteering can be divided into two main types — indirect and direct service volunteering. In an indirect service, the volunteers get the assignment in person or digitally, discuss it online with the organization as needed, do it on their own time and then submit the work digitally. It is important for a deadline to be set that allows the organization to review the work, apply modifications and then make use of the work the volunteers have done.

Indirect service volunteering for virtual volunteers

- Website design and maintenance
- Updating online search engines
- Database development and management
- Monitoring interactive websites and forums
- Composing, editing and proofreading text
- Graphic design for branding, logos, posters, invitations, brochures and newsletters
- Developing, completing and analyzing questionnaires
- Fundraising and proposal writing
- Emailing promotional materials
- Developing podcasts
- Campaigning and advocacy

- Managing social media and blogging
- Translating
- Doing online research
- Developing music and video productions
- Recording books for the visually impaired

Direct service volunteering for virtual volunteers

In direct service, the volunteering consists of real-time interaction between volunteers and recipients of the service. In the case of virtual volunteers, this might be done through text, sound or video, using programs like WhatsApp, Skype and video conferencing applications.

Types of direct virtual volunteering include:

- Online tutoring and mentoring.
- Giving presentations and workshops.
- Maintaining contact with the elderly.
- Providing interactive advice and guidance.
- Managing hotlines and monitoring real-time online discussions.

Virtual volunteer opportunities

For those who want to become virtual volunteers, the opportunities are endless. You can volunteer from HOME for organizations in your own community or on the other side of the world. Even if organizations don't list their virtual volunteer opportunities,

they may well allow their volunteers to do their work offsite — and volunteers can propose ways they can contribute to an organization virtually. Many organizations in Lebanon, in fact, often have virtual volunteers without knowing the term or having a virtual volunteer program. A volunteer who takes a document HOME, translates it and sends it back by email; a volunteer who emails invitations to a fundraising event through their personal networks; or someone who puts together the organization's newsletter from HOME are all virtual volunteers.

For now, while very few organizations in Lebanon consciously recruit virtual volunteers, volunteers can suggest ways they can serve the objectives of the organization as virtual volunteers.

Another way to find virtual volunteer opportunities is through the U.N. Online Volunteering program that launched in 2000. Its website boasts over 12,000 online volunteers per year, coming from 187 countries worldwide, and it is noteworthy that over 60 percent of those volunteers come from developing countries.

 <http://www.serviceleader.org/vv/>
<https://www.onlinevolunteering.org/>

Managing virtual volunteers in your organization

Your organization can expand its outreach and increase its impact through recruiting virtual volunteers.

The opportunities for virtual volunteers to contribute to the mission of an organization are vast and deserve serious consideration by volunteer managers. But reaping the benefits requires good management.

The guidelines for managing virtual volunteers are very similar to those for other volunteers. They include:

- Clear job descriptions and deadlines.
- Careful recruiting and vetting.
- Training, supervision, feedback and evaluation.
- Acknowledgement of volunteer efforts.

Virtual volunteers working with vulnerable populations (children, elderly and the mentally disabled) need to be especially vetted so that their competence, integrity and reliability are assured. In some cases, it is appropriate for an organization to require its virtual volunteers to come onsite for at least one face-to-face meeting or even to make periodic onsite visits.

And some volunteer policies may need to be revised to accommodate virtual volunteering, such as policies related to the use of confidential information, representation of the organization and posting information online on behalf of the organization.



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