EUROPEAN VOLUNTEER CENTRE

GUIDELINES FOR ONLINE VOLUNTEERING

These guidelines are aimed at organisations and anyone leading an initiative who is considering – or actively engaging – online volunteers. They aim to provide succinct guidance on the following main issues: making good choices as to whether online volunteers are suitable for the intended objectives and tasks; recruiting online volunteers in a safe and sustainable way; and protecting volunteers and the organisation/initiative by establishing a safe digital space for their activities, taking into account cybersecurity and online safety. For a more comprehensive overview of of online volunteering please consult the E-volunteering Handbook.[1]

[1]*E-volunteering Handbook: A Practical Guide For Individuals, Institutions And Organizations Who Want To Use New Technologies And Tap Into Virtual Communities To Make A Difference (ISBN 978-83-933936-5-7)*

I. INTRODUCING ONLINE VOLUNTEERING

In this document, online volunteering refers to activities carried out 'by volunteers online, via computers, smartphones or other hand-held devices, and often from afar'.[2] Other phrases used for such activities include e-volunteering, virtual volunteering, micro-volunteering, crowdsourcing or internet-mediated volunteering. There are many tasks that can be undertaken by online volunteers, such as, but not limited to:

- Translation,subtitling
- Developing and editing websites
- Communication tasks such as editing and writing articles, posts, blogs, press releases, newsletters
- Providing support with marketing tasks
- Managing social media accounts
- Developing online materials
- Designing graphics
- Counselling, providing expertise online
- Tutoring and mentoring
- Online campaign management and campaigning
- Moderating and managing chats, hotlines.

For information about the history and development of the online volunteering phenomenon, please see annex 1.

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[2] *J. Cravens, S.J. Ellis: The Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook: Fully Integrating Online Service into Volunteer Involvement, (2014); accessed 18 July 2019*

II. INVOLVING ONLINE VOLUNTEERS

2.1. DO YOU NEED ONLINE VOLUNTEERS TO SUPPORT YOUR ORGANISATION OR INITIATIVE?

Online volunteers can contribute to your organisation's activities by carrying out everyday tasks such as managing your social media site or helping with project-related activities. In both cases, it is important to prepare your organisation properly before engaging online volunteers.

First, it is essential to assess whether online volunteers are suitable for the required tasks and can fulfil the desired objectives. The best way to do this is to think about the work and the projects you are focusing on. Write down who is responsible for each task, the planning and deadlines, and what tasks and intermediary steps could be delegated to volunteers.

The next step is to decide which of these tasks (for example, administrative, creative, communication-related tasks or counselling, fundraising, etc.) could be carried out either fully or partially online by online volunteers. Keep in mind that if your organisation does decide to engage with online volunteers, it must also set aside time for their management. Depending on the nature of the tasks and projects identified, the online volunteer manager should plan to dedicate at least one to two hours each week to supervise and support each online volunteer. Like all new personnel, online volunteers will need guidance and support, especially at the start of their placements.

Once suitable tasks for future online volunteers have been identified, and before starting any recruitment process, the organisation should develop an online volunteering policy. This is essential in order to protect the volunteers, the organisation and the beneficiaries of the action/s. An online volunteering policy will also help to ensure you achieve the maximum impact from the volunteers' time and efforts. The policy should include how the volunteers will be recruited and managed and how their input will be evaluated. Whilst largely following the steps established for face-to-face volunteers, special provisions should be made concerning online security and safety:

- Establishing the true identity of online volunteers: have you met the person? Do you know someone who has? (see Recruiting online volunteers section)
- How to ensure the security and safety of the volunteers, the organisation and the beneficiary
- How to successfully train online volunteers and/or ensure that they have the necessary qualifications and/or skills and knowledge to match their responsibilities
- How to monitor the online volunteers' activities and provide the necessary support (reporting on tasks and sharing of information).

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2.1. RECRUITING ONLINE VOLUNTEERS

It is important to consider whether you will meet the online volunteers personally or will only have online contact with them during the recruitment process as this will determine the best process and methodology to be applied.

When online volunteers are recruited using face-to-face contact and interviews, the recruiting process can largely mirror your organisation's traditional volunteer-recruiting procedure. However, other factors must be taken into account when recruiting volunteers online.

Once your organisation has identified an online volunteer suitable for the required role, the terms of the cooperation, tasks and responsibilities should be discussed and agreed. Online volunteers could be asked to fill in a basic work plan which could be used for monitoring their progress or reporting purposes. This could be done in person, by phone or online. If it is not possible to meet the volunteer in person then it is a good idea to conduct video interviews through Skype, Zoom or another video-conferencing tool.

It is good practice to ask potential volunteers for a reference and to **cross-reference the online-volunteer-to-be via other volunteers or recognised organisations in their country or location and perhaps ask them to hold meeting in person on your behalf.** This also creates a network that could prove useful for potential cooperation and support in the future or if problems arise.

In cases of online volunteering where specific expertise is required, for example architectural design or volunteering with vulnerable groups, including children, the recruitment process should pay particular attention to **checking a volunteer's identity** and **requesting proof of qualifications and expertise**. The organisation should require criminal background checks in cases where the protection of vulnerable groups is essential and for certain tasks such as activities with children, high-risk activities, or tasks that require specific qualifications. Requesting criminal record checks for all online volunteers is good practice but should be at the discretion of the organisation based on a suitable risk assessment and taking into account local practicalities, i.e. a cost/benefit analysis and the time required to acquire the certificate.

Additional risk factors involved in the online volunteer recruitment process include fake identities, fake qualifications, abuse of power of access to data, and misuse of information. All these potential risks can harm both the project and the beneficiaries of the action while negatively affecting the organisation involved as a whole. To prevent such problems, make sure your organisation follows a safe recruitment process by paying careful attention to any alarming factors that may arise during the selection of online volunteers. It is sensible to carry out a quick online search on all potential candidates, check their social media accounts, ask for academic or professional references, and investigate whether or not they have a criminal record, as previously mentioned.

Care must be taken to ensure that any documentation provided online can be authenticated and verified.

The following questions must be discussed and agreed during the recruitment process, as setting out the expectations, communication methods, and schedule are all key to a successful online volunteer placement:

- How often and by what means will the volunteer and volunteer manager keep in touch?
- How will volunteers contact the volunteer manager?
- How will the online volunteers contact and keep in touch with one another? What communication tools will they use?
- How will tasks be sent/communicated?
- What schedule will the volunteer be given?
- What are the expectations of both the volunteers and the organisation?

Write down all the verbal arrangements made with each volunteer and share them in the request for acknowledgement of receipt and agreement. Although the standards for involving online volunteers in your organisation should follow the basic steps of volunteer recruitment and management, they should be even more thorough to counter the additional risk factors involved.

See annex 2 for more information about recruiting and managing online volunteers.

2.1. LIABILITY OF ONLINE VOLUNTEERS AND ORGANISATIONS AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Depending on the national jurisdiction of the organisation involved, the accuracy or reliability of any advice, opinion, communication or other information provided by an online volunteer, which appears in any communication material or online, can become the organisation's responsibility based on the fact that the volunteer is under the supervision of the said organisation. Any difficulties arising from potential mistakes or from the beneficiaries' reliance on incorrect advice or statements can fall on the organisation if the online volunteer was acting within the scope of its responsibilities when the incident occurred. Consequently, it is important to check beforehand how volunteer insurance, if it is available in your country, can be used for online volunteers. If it is possible, including online volunteers in the organisation's public liability insurance could prove beneficial in the long-term. Additionally, adding a liability clause to the volunteer agreement can be a good way to limit the organisation's exposure to financial and legal risks.

III. ONLINE SECURITY

Online security refers to technical issues such as protecting information stored online and other aspects of cybersecurity. This is particularly important for any volunteering roles that involve campaigning.

Below is a list of guidelines that can help your organisation create and manage a volunteer project safely in the digital environment.

3.1. CYBER/INTERNET/COMPUTER SECURITY: PROTECTION FROM HACKING

Of course, online volunteering and managing online volunteers highlights issues regarding online safety and cybersecurity. The internet is an amazing tool that can help your organisation to make a difference by involving online volunteers. However, there are a few cybersecurity tools that offer support when involving online volunteers. It is your organisation's responsibility to prepare the online volunteers for their tasks digitally.

One point to be discussed and agreed on is whether your organisation will be liable for any computer virus, computer failure or digital problems arising either during or as a result of online volunteering activity.

3.2. DATA STEALING

Copyright issues must be kept in mind. Although creating original online content can sometimes be challenging, especially under time pressures it is important that your volunteers are aware that plagiarism and stealing media content could cause problems for your organisation. There are numerous stock photo libraries online that could be accessed by anyone. Furthermore, there are very useful websites that can help you and your online volunteers to create original content without infringing copyright issues. Awareness of, and adherence to copyright law should be part of the volunteer agreement, where applicable. There should also be agreement as to who owns the copyright to the material developed by the volunteer, i.e. the organisation or the volunteer.

The GDPR regulation is one of the most important data regulations to be adhered to by the organisation and the online volunteers alike. GDPR stands for the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (GDPR) which is European Union (EU) legislation aimed at protecting the data and privacy of citizens of the EU and the European Economic Area (EEA). It gives EU citizens control of their personal information. Thus, any activity in which a volunteer collects, organises, updates or works with the personal data of individuals residing within the EU must be GDPR compliant. As your organisation is (hopefully) already following GDPR procedures, no additional steps are required other than making sure that the volunteer is following your organisation's GDPR Compliance Guidelines. It is recommended that you highlight the importance of this issue during training and prepare a GDPR checklist for the volunteers which they can follow during their placements.

3.3. PASSWORDS

Many placements may not require the online volunteer to have access to the organisation's internal operating system. In fact, you can design a placement in such a way that they do not need to by, for example, setting up a shared Google Docs site specifically for the task in hand. If volunteers do need access to any internal organisation system, it is good practice to ask them to sign an additional ICT Acceptable Use Policy document which includes information about password use.

Passwords are one of the most important security measures to consider when engaging online volunteers. Initially, sharing access to online platforms, communication channels or databases with online volunteers can be daunting. However, by following these few tips you can make this step both easy and safe. First, you need to ensure the passwords used are secure. Draw up a secure and strong password list. Secure passwords are hard to guess! When creating a secure password for your organisation and your online volunteer keep the following in mind:

- Do not use personal data such as the name of the organisation, project or the volunteer, date, address
- Use a combination of upper and lowercase letters, and special characters
- Change passwords on a regular basis.

Make sure that your volunteer does not save the password in a browser with password-remembering features, especially if more than one person has access to the laptop/computer. It can cause several problems ranging from identity theft or data loss to the loss of websites and social media channels.

Note: Use of any password-protected platform or tool should always be restricted to those online volunteers who have signed an agreement and have been given permission and passwords to access the given information or site. In the code of conduct/ volunteer agreement, it should be highlighted that each volunteer is responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of the login and access details shared with them and the password they have created for the organisation. Volunteers should immediately notify the organisation of any unauthorised use of their registration or password.

IV. ONLINE SAFETY

Online safety is about creating safe spaces online, empowering volunteers and protecting them from cyber violence whilst, at the same time, protecting anyone else they may come into contact with online during the course of their volunteering.

It is well known that online communication, especially written communication, is not the same as face-to-face verbal communication.[3] For this reason, greater care than would be required in verbal discussions and exchanges is needed in order to avoid choosing words and phrases that could potentially be harmful. Furthermore, it goes without saying that online volunteers should behave in a responsible way that maintains and builds the reputation of the organisation or initiative for which they are volunteering. It is recommended that during the training process the organisation introduces the volunteer to the rules and guidelines of 'netiquette' (internet etiquette).[4]

[3] *Roger L. Cayer and Renee K. Sacks, 'Oral and Written Discourse of Basic Writers: Similarities and Differences', Research in the Teaching of English, vol. 13, no. 2, 1979, pp. 121-128.*

[4] *Jayne Cravens, Susan J. Ellis, The Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook: Fully Integrating Online Service into Volunteer Involvement, chapter 11, p.62.*

4.1. ONLINE IDENTIFICATION

Identifying and confirming that a person online is who they claim to be is difficult. In some contexts it is not even desired or necessary, especially in forums that allow and require anonymous interaction by users such as those aimed at people with specific challenges that they wish to keep private and confidential. Eg help forums for people with eating disorders. Whilst the organisation doesn't necessarily need to know who is using online platforms and asking for help, support or advice, it is nevertheless important to ensure that the volunteers involved are clearly identified and can prove that they have any necessary certification or qualifications.

Confidentiality is essential in any kind of activity undertaken as an online volunteer. In particular, online volunteers who run advice forums, hotlines, etc. should respect and maintain the confidentiality of personal and privileged information even after the volunteering agreement has ended. They should never disclose, without authorisation, directly or indirectly, to any person or medium, the personal information of beneficiaries or other volunteers or the organisation's internal affairs.

4.2. NEGATIVE OR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR AND CYBERBULLYING

Online volunteers may experience different types of online abuse, such as cyberbullying, cyber harassment, cyber stalking, hate speech and trolling. It is good practice to train volunteers to recognise these situations and learn how to react to them. Empowering your online volunteers with skills and knowledge on how to respond to negative behaviour and cyberbullying not only protects your online volunteer but also helps to ensure the safety of all Internet users and it contributes to the protection of human rights online.

It is important that your online volunteers know that your organisation is there to help them in case of any issues or difficulties. However, it is essential that they collect evidence in the way of screenshots and other proof of problems which will allow your organisation to report abuse to authorities, and expediate the removal of abusive content.

The actions of cyberbullies most often constitutes a violation of the website's terms of service. Eg Social media platforms have their own procedures for reporting, so make sure that your online volunteers who may be using these websites, are familiar with the steps and mechanisms that they need to take to report online abuse and harassment. Your organisation can also prevent further instances by blocking the cyberbully.

To be on the safe side, it is worth to report threats of harm and inappropriate sexual messages to the police or other authorities as these cases are often prosecuted by law.

Many European countries have established their own national reporting systems and support network for victims of cyberbullying and online hate speech. Eg: On the website of the Council of Europe No Hate Speech Youth Campaign, you can find a breakdown of national reporting procedures for numerous countries.[5]

Unfortunately, there is no single, universal and concrete way for dealing with cyberbullying and online hate speech. However, your organisation should ensure that measures and procedures are in place to deal with such instances and that online volunteers are aware of them. They should also be regularly reviewed and updated as necessary.

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[5] *No Hate Speech Youth Campaign https://www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign/reporting-to-national-bodies#{%2237118627%22:[8]}*

V. CONCLUSION

Online volunteers can be a great asset to any organisation or initiative and following these guidelines can contribute to a successful engagement. For more tips and useful information, have a look at:

- Jayne Cravens and James Stewart: Internet-mediated volunteering in the EU. Its history, prevalence, and approaches and how it relates to employability and social inclusion (2014)
- J. Cravens and S.J. Ellis: The Last Virtual Volunteering Guidebook: Fully Integrating Online Service into Volunteer Involvement, (2014).
- E-volunteering Handbook: A Practical Guide For Individuals, Institutions And Organizations Who Want To Use New Technologies And Tap Into Virtual Communities To Make A Difference (ISBN 978-83-933936-5-7)

VI. ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: THE HISTORY OF ONLINE VOLUNTEERING

In recent years, online volunteering has become a much-sought-after service. Websites and organisations offer and promote short and long-term volunteering positions for a variety of projects ranging from translation work to website development to online counselling. You might think that these opportunities resulted from the rapid development of digital technology witnessed over the last five to ten years, but this is not the case.

Ellis and Cravens (2000) point out that the first online volunteering project started as early as 1971 when Project Gutenberg set out to digitalise famous works of literature by authors such as Charles Dickens, Mark Twain and Jane Austen whose novels were typed up and proof-read by online volunteers around the world.[6] As the internet became more and more accessible, new online initiatives emerged. Ellis and Cravens mention that Impact Online, an American-based non-profit organisation, promoted online volunteering back in 1995. This organisation was among the first to realise that although there was a demand for online volunteering placements, there were not enough organisations willing to engage online volunteers. To overcome this, in 1996, Impact Online started the Virtual Volunteering project which aimed to research virtual volunteering and promote it among organisations. This initiative was later transformed into a volunteer matching platform called VolunteerMatch.[7]

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[6] S.J. Ellis and J. Cravens, 'Virtual Volunteering Guidebook: How to Apply the Principles of Real-World Volunteer Management to Online Service', (2000).
[7] S.J. Ellis and J. Cravens, 'The LAST Virtual Volunteering Guidebook', (2013).

With the internet becoming increasingly accessible, the number of internet-mediated volunteer initiatives available for people to join grew. By the end of the 20th century, the Virtual Volunteering project noted almost 100 organisations offering online volunteering opportunities worldwide. Although only five online volunteering websites were noted in Europe, it seems likely that there were more volunteers actually carrying out tasks and responsibilities online.[8]

The United Nations Volunteers' online volunteering website, which is perhaps the most well-known example of platforms gathering online volunteering opportunities, is almost 20 years old. First launched in 2000 as NetAid, a UN Development Programme initiative run jointly with the UN Volunteers programme, it provided a platform for UN-affiliated initiatives and projects to find and engage online volunteers for activities in the developing world. In 2004, the project was relaunched as the onlinevolunteering.org, now managed entirely by the UN Volunteers programme.[9]

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[8] *Ibid. (Cravens and Ellis, 2013, Introduction, fifth paragraph), and http://web.archive.org/web/20001214092700/http:/www.serviceleader.org/vv/orgs/outside.html (accessed 20 July 2019).*

[9] *Jayne Cravens and James Stewart: Internet-mediated volunteering in the EU. Its history, prevalence, and approaches and how it relates to employability and social inclusion (2014), p.17.*

Another well-known, although slightly different online volunteer initiative is the Cyber-Volunteers program which started in 2005 with the support of UNESCO Switzerland. This initiative engages online volunteers who have professional or academic experience and skills in information and communication technologies (ICT) to support projects and organisations dedicated to helping developing communities.[10]

The EU's European Youth Portal dedicates a whole page to online volunteering, describing it as an opportunity mainly for those who live with disabilities, have complicated schedules or experience other difficulties that can potentially prevent them from engaging in face-to-face volunteering activities.

So, as we can see, rather than being a new phenomenon, online volunteering is an activity which is also encouraged and facilitated by EU-funded programmes. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of comprehensive guidelines for managing such volunteers. Certain steps in their involvement are similar to traditional volunteer recruitment and management practices, but certain concerns must be addressed for this practice to be both safe and successful, including issues concerning identity, security, reliability and monitoring, all of which are addressed in these guidelines.

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[10] *http://www.icvolunteers.org/index.php?what=vol&id=111 (accessed 6 August 2019).*

ANNEX 2: USEFUL DRAFT DOCUMENTS FOR RECRUITING & MANAGING ONLINE VOLUNTEERS.

ONLINE VOLUNTEER AGREEMENT
DRAFT CONTENT

This online volunteer agreement has been concluded by and between ……….………………………………………….. (organisation), hereinafter referred to as the Organisation and……….…………………………………….. (volunteer), hereinafter referred to as the Online Volunteer, on xx/xx/xxxx, as follows:

The Organisation entrusts the performance of the following services of ……… ……… to the Online Volunteer who agrees to perform these services.

This agreement is valid from …………..………… to ………………….

The Online Volunteer agrees to volunteer for …….. hours on the following days: …………………………………………………………………………………………

During the placement, the Online Volunteer will fulfil the role of ………………………..……………….. and will be supervised by ………………………..……

The services outlined above will be performed using a secure internet connection from any place chosen by the Online Volunteer. In addition, the Online Volunteer commits to the following:

- To fulfil the role as outlined in the attached volunteer role description.• To perform the role to the best of their ability.
- To follow the organisation's policies and procedures.
- To meet time and task commitments and to provide sufficient notice when not available.
- To act in a way that is in line with the organisation's aims and objectives and enhances its work.

The Organisation commits to the following:

- To provide adequate information and training to meet the expectations as described in the description of the volunteer's role.
- To allow for a trial period of ...... weeks.
- To explain what is required of the Online Volunteer and to support and provide encouragement to help him/her achieve the desired results.
- To assign a named supervisor to the Online Volunteer who will provide him/her with regular support and supervision meetings and will act as the 'go to' person.
- To treat the Online Volunteer with respect and courtesy at all times.
- To be receptive to any comments and feedback from all volunteers.
- To value and recognise online volunteers as a significant resource in achieving the organisation's goals.

The Organisation and the Online Volunteer agree to notify the other party about any issues that may arise whilst performing the services. The Organisation agrees to provide support and training to the Online Volunteer on online security and safety in order to prevent such issues.

This Agreement has been drafted in ..... copies, with each of the contractual parties receiving ....

This Online Volunteer Agreement is binding in honour only and is not intended to be a legally binding contract between the Online Volunteer and the Organisation. It may be cancelled at any time at the discretion of either party.

Agreed to by:

Signature of Organisation ………………………………………….. Date ………………

Signature of Online Volunteer …………………………………… Date ……………….

CODE OF CONDUCT
DRAFT CONTENT

The online volunteer agrees to:

- respect, adhere and uphold the values and principles of ……………… as expressed in the statutes;
- endeavour to work considerately and respectfully with all those they come into contact with at …………..…..……….;
- respect diversity, different roles and boundaries, and avoid giving offence;
- strive for excellence in the delivery of tasks, services and activities;
- support the objects and mission of ……………. championing it, using any skills or knowledge to further that mission and seeking expert advice where appropriate;
- respect organisational and individual confidentiality. The online volunteer is responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of all privileged information to which they are exposed while volunteering at ………………………..;
- give up his/her ownership rights over all material which was developed or acquired by him/her during the course of the placement. The hosting organisation maintains the property and copyrights of these intellectual outputs;
- follow the procedures outlined in the ICT Acceptable Use Policy document and sign the document.

Code of Conduct Agreement
I, the undersigned ……………………………………………………………………., as an online volunteer at ……………………., have read these conditions and agree to abide by the Code of Conduct of the …………………………………….

Date
Signatures of both parties.

ANNEX 3: USEFUL WEBSITES AND RESOURCES

Communication tools for the recruitment process and for keeping in regular contact with the selected volunteers:

- Skype
- Google Hangouts
- Zoom
- Slack

Copyright:

- Pexels, Stock Footage For Free, and Pixabay for stock photos and footage
- Flaticon & Freepik for free-to-use icons and images

Tools and websites useful for online safety and online security:

- HeartMob: https://iheartmob.org/ real-life support to those experiencing online harassment
- Crash Override Network: http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com/ hotline and resources centre for those experiencing online harassment
- Block Together: https://twitter.com/blocktogether tool that helps to block numerous trolls, harassers, etc. with one click on social media
- Do it yourself online safety guide (Chayn): https://chayn.co/safety/
- HackBlossom's DIY Guide to Feminist Cybersecurity, which can be adapted to the needs of volunteers and the organisation: https://hackblossom.org/cybersecurity/