



# Online volunteering doesn't ask much

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*In the era of social media the networks of non-profits and volunteers can do a lot more than in the past.*

Social networks have existed as long as humans – in fact, the ability to socialise is a large part, maybe the most important part, of what distinguishes Homo sapiens from other primates. Since the telegraph began to wire the world, and the telephone and the Internet made it possible for most people in the world to communicate with most other people, social networks have taken on particular significance.

It is widely accepted that we live in an era where on-line social network sites are changing our perception of what a social network is. The common definition says that a social network is an association of people drawn together by family, work or hobby. The term dates back to the 1950s, and was coined by professor J. A. Barnes. The definition itself hasn't changed a lot, except that today we live in a digital era where all connections between the nodes in a network can be easily seen and visually presented. Thus they enable us to extend our networks even further and intensify communication with our peers.

Wellman points out a small fact of contemporary life: making a telephone call in the wired age meant making a connection with a place, but making a phone call in the wireless age means making a connection with a person. Now that so many people are able to carry instant access to their social networks in their pockets, what do we know about how they think about themselves, about where they are, about what 'where' means? (Wellman, 2001) Does the historical shift from virtual communities to personal social networks, what Wellman calls 'networked individualism' mean that we are not just seeing new types of literacy, but new kinds of people who regard themselves in new ways, especially in relationship to their social ties?

Well, the answer to this question is YES. And the proof is the new ways in which people commit their time and knowledge to help a cause.

Online volunteering is not a new thing. People with a will to help have been trying to use this technology in order to make more effective contributions since its inception. It is no different today, except that the tools are a bit different. The tools are now completely social and (usually) are part of a wider spectrum of activities. It means one can join and start volunteering in just a few seconds. A person can find the perfect project where she can contribute most and she can proudly, and most of all, very easily share her work with her 'social graph'.



## Micro-volunteering and crowd-sourcing

New tools demand new terms that describe them more precisely. The hot terms, although as activities they not very new, are micro-volunteering and crowd-sourcing. These are assignments that do not take long to complete; do not involve high security or handling of proprietary data; do not require much supervision; are important, as all volunteering activities should be, but not immediately critical and can be done by just one person, rather than needing an organised team.

According to one of the most recognisable online volunteering services, Sparked.com, micro-volunteering has four defining characteristics:

- 1. Convenient** – It's volunteerism that fits into your schedule when you have time – typically (but not necessarily) via an Internet-connected device such as a personal computer or mobile phone.
- 2. Bite-sized** – Volunteer tasks are broken into small pieces, so that you can complete a task in the time you have available.
- 3. Crowd-sourced** – The non-profit organisation that needs help asks a large group for assistance. Micro-volunteers who have the time, interest and skills (ideally), and who may be previously unknown to the organisation, do the work.
- 4. Network-managed** – The time demands of the manager are reduced by distributing much of the project management and quality review to the network of micro-volunteers.

The use of many different online tools for management, collaboration and co-ordination of the work of a large group provides numerous new opportunities for both sides. Now, many non-profits, in a short period of time, can reach large numbers of potential volunteers that can get familiar with their work

and help them improve it even further. They are spared paperwork and bureaucratic procedures and can focus on the work instead.

## Be aware of slacktivism

'A social network is not necessarily bound by relationships as much as it is driven by the exchange of shared ideas and information through a one-to-one and one-to-many conversation that is inclusive of top-down, bottom-up, inside-out, and outside-in peer-to-peer interaction.' (Solis, 2009) But putting the right tools in place means that one has to set up an appropriate plan for measuring the real effect of the volunteer work. Armchair activism, or 'slacktivism' as it is currently called, is an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. In this sense all non-profits should plan to avoid as much as possible these kinds of activities as it is clear that they will not bring any real results and at the end of the day the work will not be finished.

## What is online volunteering/ virtual volunteering?

The biggest volunteer-made website, Wikipedia, says: 'Virtual volunteering is a term describing a volunteer who completes tasks, in whole or in part, off-site from the organisation being assisted, using the Internet and a home, school, telecenter or work computer or other Internet-connected device. Virtual volunteering is also known as online volunteering, cyber service, telementoring, and teletutoring, and various other names.'

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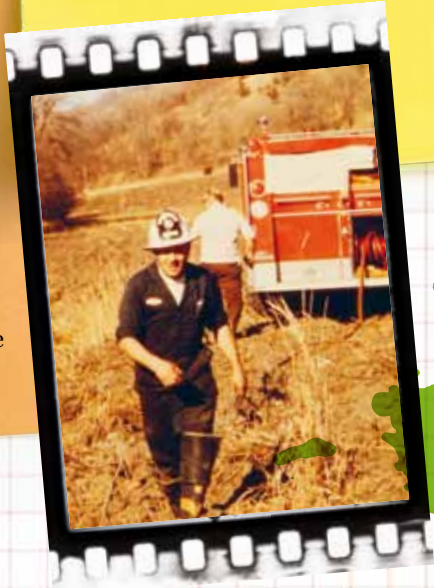


Three points you or your activists should retain:

**1** Humans do the volunteering, online and offline. So if you've already been working on volunteering programs offline, you've learned the most important lessons for doing it online. Don't hesitate much when working towards a big goal (mission); think of small, short-term tasks and try to reach a committed group of core people to make the desired changes in society.

**2** Young people are at the forefront of new media use; youth NGOs should be too. The so-called 'Google generation' doesn't distinguish between the online and offline world. They don't know a world without the Internet. So whatever they do they will associate it with working online. This is a huge potential for youth NGOs. My advice is to start volunteering yourself for someone else online. For example, join the Spark.com network and gain first-hand experience. When you grasp the basics try the other side and initiate an online volunteering action yourself. Try to create a community of online volunteers that otherwise would not be able to help your cause.

**3** Building an effective online community of volunteers takes time. 'Rome wasn't built in a day!' So try to set up a mid-term plan and don't give up easily. You have to be honest, transparent and persistent. Remember people join online communities because they can do it easily; they come back because they are fulfilling some needs and wishes and they engage because they have the feeling that their work is appreciated and helps others.



Good luck and share your successes and failures with me @darko156

### Resources

Solis, B. (2009) 'The Ties that Bind Us - Visualizing Relationships on Twitter and Social Networks', available online at: [www.briansolis.com/2009/02/ties-that-binds-us-visualizing/](http://www.briansolis.com/2009/02/ties-that-binds-us-visualizing/)

Wellman, B. (2001) 'Physical Place and CyberPlace: The Rise of Personalized Networking', available online at: <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/individualism/ijurr3a1.htm>