Involving Volunteers: Essential for Community Technology Initiatives

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Volunteers programme (www.unvolunteers.org) believes that volunteer involvement is an *essential* and *fundamental* element to the success of community technology initiatives. This includes, but is not limited to, telecenters/community technology centers (CTCs) and community radio stations. This philosophy about the essential nature of volunteers lead UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to create the United Nations Information Technology Service (UNITeS) initiative, www.unites.org, to promote volunteer involvement in ICT4D efforts and to support volunteers who are engaged in such efforts.

For instance, many successful CTCs attribute their achievements in communities not just to the technologies they make available, but to the *personal* assistance they provide in using those technologies. For many CTCs, there is only one sustainable way to provide substantial levels of personal assistance: involving volunteers.

What is a volunteer? There is no universally-accepted definition of the term "volunteer." For the purposes of this unit, the following definition is used:

For civil society organizations and other mission-based agencies, a volunteer is someone who:

∑   receives no wages from the organization (but may receive a stipend or some compensation from another organization who has arranged for the volunteer placement, such as a volunteer sending agency; or, from a for-profit company, if the volunteer is "on loan" to the organization)

∑   commits a fixed number of hours to the organization, for a fixed period (it can be a day, a week, six months, a year...)

∑   is making his or her commitment to donate time and services to the organization of his or her own free will (although many organizations count those who provide service to an organization as part of a class or court requirement as a volunteer, since these people meet the first two criteria and work along side other volunteers, doing exactly the same tasks).

This means that anyone providing any service to your organization and who is NOT paid by the organization is volunteer, which, in turn, means:

∑   The members of your board of directors or your advisory board are volunteers.

∑ Those providing pro bono consulting are volunteers.

Whether or not you accept this definition is up to you. But make sure you do have a set definition for who is and is not a volunteer before you begin plans to involve volunteers at your organization. This will avoid misunderstandings and missteps in your volunteer program, which in turn can lead to bad feelings and adverse public relations about your organization.

PART 1: WHY INVOLVE VOLUNTEERS

Exercise #1: Why Involve Volunteers

Ask the audience, if there is a large enough number of people, to break up into sub-groups of three-four people, and for each sub-group to brainstorm, for three minutes only, the advantages of involving volunteers. At the end of the three minutes, the larger group will come together again. OR, if there is not enough people to break up into sub-groups, simply ask the entire audience to ponder the question for a moment. The facilitator then asks for the audience to call out reasons to involve volunteers, writing down the reasons on a paper flip chart or white board for all to see. Then, when the group has finished, the facilitator will show the following reasons to the group, via the Powerpoint presentation, and compare it with the list they came up with.

The reason for this first exercise is: (1) to get the group talking, something that they will, hopefully, continue to do for the rest of the unit presentation, and, (2) because some people are more likely to share in a small-group setting than in front of the entire group, and this allows for their inputs to be shared and considered.

Reasons to Involve Volunteers:

1. Volunteers bring an attitude and a spirit to their work that is different than fully-paid staff. It is not a better work ethic or motivation, just a different one, one that complements that of paid staff. Through this particular volunteer attitude, volunteers can bring a personal passion and fresh perspective to a project.

2. Volunteers can free up the time of fully-paid staff to deal with many other critical issues and tasks. This can allow those served by ICT4D initiatives to get more one-on-one assistance. It means that capacity-building efforts of an ICT4d project go much farther than they would with paid-staff alone.

3. Volunteers are often motivated to get their family, friends and co-workers to volunteer their time and expertise as well. This means that volunteers can extend a program's sphere of influence and access to additional people, businesses and organizations.

4. Volunteers bring the luxury of focus. A volunteer is usually focused on a particular issue or activity at a project, and can fully concentrate on only that issue or activity, whereas fully paid staff must often take on a myriad of unrelated responsibilities.

5. Volunteers may have skills, experiences or expertise that current staff don't have, but that are very much needed by the organization. They can bring a

diversity of culture, skills, and experience that might be lacking among paid staff.

6. Volunteers are not financially-dependent upon the project they are assisting. This can mean they can approach assignments with less pressure and stress than fully-paid staff, and may make them feel even more free to experiment in their service, to try new things or to offer criticism.

7. Volunteers often feel more free than fully-paid staff to propose innovations or new ways of operating, and more free to criticize. If volunteers are not a part of the population served by the organization, they can be more objective about issues.

8. If volunteers are among the population served by the organization, they can bring first-hand knowledge to their contributions

9. In certain cases, some people served by a project are more inclined to work with volunteers than paid staff. These people may see volunteers as more neutral in their approaches than paid-staff, or they may feel that volunteers are there to help more because of personal motivation, while paid staff is there because it's their "job."

10. Volunteers can become effective advocates for your organization. A letter to your local newspaper, or a testimonial to your local government, from a volunteer at your organization can carry more "weight" than that of a paid staff person, because a volunteer is not depending on a salary from your organization for his or her livelihood.

11. Many funding bodies/donors rate volunteer involvement highly when choosing programs to support.

These are all great reasons to make involving volunteers part of meeting the mission of your community technology initiative.

But Don't Volunteers Save Money?

Yes, volunteers can save money, but there are **dangers** if you emphasize this quality over all of the other benefits of involving volunteers, because the perception is:

∑ If you had more money, you would hire staff instead of involving volunteers.

∑ If you lay off your entire staff, you could save even more money.

Imagine reporting to a donor that you had saved a certain amount of money by involving volunteers instead of paid staff for a particular function, and the donor saying, "Great! We're going to cut our funding for your organization, because you can save even more money by using volunteers instead of paid staff." Or, imagine a local workers union protesting your organization because you are involving volunteers instead of their members. Both are scenarios you want to avoid, and you will if you downplay the "volunteers save money" theme!

PART 2: DEFINING VOLUNTEER ASSIGNMENTS

If your organization is committed to involving volunteers, then the FIRST step in involving volunteers is to define possible assignments for volunteers, and to *put these assignments in writing*. This should be done before ANY recruitment of any kind takes place.

Exercise #2: Brainstorming possible volunteer assignments

Ask the audience, if there is a large enough number of people, to break up into sub-groups of three-four people, and for each sub-group to brainstorm, for five full minutes, tasks that volunteers could undertake as part of a community technology initiative. At the end of the five minutes, the larger group will come together again. OR, if there is not enough people to break up into sub-groups, simply ask the entire audience to ponder the question for a moment. The facilitator will then ask for the audience to call out their identified tasks for volunteers, writing down the tasks on a paper flip chart or white board for all to see. Then, when the group has finished, the facilitator will show the following ideas on the PowerPoint presentation, and compare it with the list they came up with:

∑ Supporting the organization's own ICT needs: networking computers, trouble-shooting equipment, upgrading computers, doing an inventory of equipment, etc.

∑ Outreaching to communities served by the organization, in particular certain types of users (educators, medical professionals, social workers, small entrepreneurs, senior citizens, youth, etc.)

∑ Teaching classes and/or creating class materials

∑ Providing one-to-one assistance to people using the resources of a community technology initiative

∑ Building and maintaining a web site

∑ Building databases to manage information about an organization (activities, class attendants, volunteers, information gathered from those served by the initiative, etc.)

∑ Researching potential funding resources and writing funding proposals

∑ Preparing an annual report or financial statement

∑ Offering professional expertise in human resources management, project management, legal issues, marketing, etc.

∑ Helping to schedule and manage other volunteers

Truly, the possibilities of what volunteers can do to support your organization are limited only by your imagination.

A written volunteer assignment description should include:

∑   a title for the assignment

∑   a narrative description of the assignment that includes a statement of WHY this assignment is important to the organization (don't just list what needs to be done; explain what difference the task makes to those you serve)

∑   the number of hours a day, a week or a month a volunteer is expected to contribute if he or she is accepted for the assignment

∑   the period of time the volunteer is expected to commit to if he or she is accepted for the assignment (a day? a week? a month? six months?)

∑   the skills and experience the volunteer should have ("the candidate must speak Spanish and English fluently, and must have experience in SQL programming")

∑   how many volunteers will be accepted for this one assignment, and if they will work as a team or independently

In doing this exercise for EVERY task, you will better ensure that volunteers will stay with your organization longer, as there will be less misunderstandings about what a volunteer is supposed to do. You may discover that, in writing out a volunteer assignment, that tasks you have identified "in your head," before committing them to paper, are actually too big or too many for any one volunteer to do, and will need to be broken down into smaller assignments. And it demonstrates to candidates how seriously you are about volunteer involvement, and will encourage them to take it just as seriously.

If you cannot write out each and ever volunteer assignment, your organization is not ready to involve volunteers.

PART 3: KEYS TO SUCCESS IN INVOLVING VOLUNTEERS

Retaining volunteers -- keeping people involved past the first time they show up to help -- is one of the biggest problems faced by organizations trying to involve volunteers. No one wants to spend time recruiting volunteers who won't last beyond one or two days of service.

Undertaking the following tasks will better guarantee that volunteers are effective in their roles supporting your organization, and that fewer volunteers "drop out" before a task is complete:

1.   As emphasized earlier, detailed assignment descriptions, in writing, are absolutely essential. They assure that roles and expectations are clear, demonstrate how serious the tasks are, and show your organization's commitment to quality -- all of which will motivate the volunteer to take the

tasks seriously and to stay committed.

2.   Volunteer roles are NOT open ended. Give every volunteer assignment an end date, and give the volunteer the opportunity to end his or her association with your organization, or to renew that association, at this "end date."

3.   Streamline the volunteer candidate screening/orientation process
Every potential volunteering candidate should have a meeting or process that introduces the person to the organization, helps the candidate understand the organization's mission, and makes very clear what the person may, and may not, do as a volunteer. You can save time and your sanity by requiring all volunteer candidates to attend such a volunteer orientation before they are officially accepted and begin assignments. This will automatically screen out people who might not take a volunteer commitment seriously (if they don't show up for the orientation, can you trust them to show up for the assignment?):

o1   Hold the orientation at a regular time ever week, every month, every-other-month, etc., depending on your resources and needs. Every volunteer candidate should know when the next orientation is.

o2   Make the orientation no more than ONE hour.

o3   Include a written description of your organization and its activities, to hand out to all attendees.

o4   Provide a written copy of your employee policies (prohibition against sexual harassment, security requirements, confidentiality policies, etc.), and let the volunteer candidates know that these policies, with the exception of those having to do with compensation, apply to volunteers as well. You may want the candidates to sign something affirming that they have read the policies and will adhere to them; this reinforces that you take these policies very seriously, and if you ever have to fire a volunteer for violating a policy, you have "proof" that the volunteer knew the policy before he or she even started providing service to your organization.

o5   Provide details on what a volunteer should do if he or experiences any problems, obstacles or questions. Who is the person designated to help volunteers if they are facing particular problems?

o6   Provide a list of current volunteering assignments, and ask candidates to officially sign up for one or more, as appropriate. Ask each candidate if the information is clear.

o7   Direct candidates to the next step for volunteering. This could be the date they will start their volunteering assignment, or a training session, where the volunteer candidates will review the kinds of scenarios a he or she might face in a particular assignment. The candidates should leave the orientation knowing exactly what to do next.

1.   When starting a volunteer involvement program, START SMALL. Begin with just a *few* volunteers and assignments. Do NOT try to involve many volunteers all at

once. Grow your volunteering program slowly, gradually and organically. This will allow you to see what works best and what doesn't for your organization, and to make adjustments before problems get out-of-hand. Only when you get involvement on a small scale working well should you think about expanding your involvement of volunteers.

This may see like a lot to do. But implementing these systems will result in MANY benefits, most of which will save you time later. As a result of these practices:

∑ Volunteers who wouldn't have been able to make the commitment drop out before they ever begin an assignment. It's one thing to say, "Yes, I want to volunteer and I will show up on time." It's another thing to actually do it.

∑ Volunteers who go through this system will stay on longer with your organization, and will be more committed, because expectations are clear and because you have demonstrated a commitment to support them.

∑ Volunteers who go through this system will not need as much support and supervision, because information is clear from the very start.

∑ You will save time in the long run, because you will not be spending inordinate amounts of time tracking down volunteers who signed up but don't show up, answering the same questions again and again from volunteers, etc.

PART 4: THE VOLUNTEER MANAGER

A volunteer manager can be someone already on your staff, who will have the additional responsibility of orienting all volunteers, tracking their progress, and serving as their advocate on staff.

A volunteer manager can also be a VOLUNTEER, someone recruited specifically for this role.

The role of the volunteer manager:

∑ Devotes two to five hours a week to tasks at your organization.

∑ If he or she is a volunteer, then the person needs to commit at least four months of service to the organization, and document all activities for the next volunteer manager.

∑ Works with the organization staff to identify and fully define assignments that could be delegated to volunteers.

∑ Creates an application that all potential volunteers must complete.

∑ Promptly replies to all onsite visits, phone calls and email inquiries from potential volunteers, providing them with information on the next step in volunteering (which should be the orientation session).

∑ Regularly conducts the volunteer orientation for people who want to volunteer with your organization.

∑ If necessary, calls volunteer candidate references after each orientation and determines if the person can become a volunteer.

∑ Notifies candidates after acceptance as volunteers with information about the next step to get started on a volunteering assignment (this can be setting up a meeting with the person he or she is actually going to work with at the organization, for instance).

∑ Regularly talks with staff about their involvement of volunteers, documents successes and problems, and reports this to all staff regularly.

∑ Reports to the organization's staff regularly regarding how many people are inquiring about volunteering each month, how many are rejected, how many drop out, what volunteers are achieving, how many hours they are contributing, adjustments that need to be made in the program, etc.

Results of having a volunteer manager who is in charge of making sure all of the above happen:

∑ Volunteers will be more committed to your organization, because they will feel supported, and see the organization as efficient and well-run.

∑ Data will be tracked and available for funders to show the effectiveness of your volunteer involvement, and this can lead to additional funding.

∑ Staff will become more excited about involving volunteers, because the effectiveness of the program will be presented to them regularly.

∑ Problems that may be preventing success in your volunteer-involvement program will be identified and addressed early, preventing further problems.

PART 5: RECRUITMENT

Only after you have put all of the aforementioned systems into place should you think about recruiting volunteers. It is the LAST thing you do, not the first thing, on the road to involving volunteers.

Usually, compared to all of the aforementioned tasks, volunteer recruitment is the easy part. But your recruitment efforts will be for naught without your implementing the previous activities. Otherwise, volunteers will be recruited and have nothing to do, or will not feel supported, and will drop out before they have begun, or before an assignment is finished. Serious problems may even arise that endanger a program at your organization as a result of recruiting and involving volunteers before implementing the aforementioned steps.

Before brainstorming possible recruitment avenues for volunteers, consider how your organization will make sure your volunteer corps is diverse. You should reach out, if possible, to:

∑ youth
∑ elders/seniors
∑ women
∑ people with disabilities
∑ people from ethnic or religious groups that are traditionally under-represented at your organization
∑ other people who are often socially-excluded

This unit does not discuss the value of diversity, but the author hopes that the importance and value of diversity is something that is inherently understood by anyone managing a community technology initiative, and that the reasons to have volunteers represent diverse populations is something the audience is already bought-in to.

To undertake recruitment successfully, you have to understand what motivates people to want to volunteer, and what would motivate them to volunteer for your organization in particular.

Exercise #3: Why Do People Want to Volunteer?

Ask the audience, if there is a large enough number of people, to break up into sub-groups of three-four people, and for each sub-group to brainstorm, for three minutes only, why people want to volunteer, or why they might want to volunteer for a community technology initiative. At the end of the three minutes, the larger group will come together again. OR, if there is not enough people to break up into sub-groups, simply ask the entire audience to ponder the question for a moment. The facilitator will then ask for the audience to call out their ideas, writing down the reasons on a paper flip chart or white board for all to see. Then, when the group has finished, the facilitator will show the following ideas, via the Powerpoint presentation, and compare it with the list they came up with.

Volunteer motivations: Why do people volunteer, and why might they want to volunteer for a community technology initiative? Because they:

∑ want to support or contribute to a particular cause, issue or community

∑ want to learn about how NGOs work, or about NGO jobs, and about issues faced by a particular organization, and how that organization addresses such

∑ want to learn more about a particular community, culture or issue

∑ feel a personal obligation to "give back" to their community, or in support of a particular cause

∑ want to counter a feeling of powerlessness about a particular issue or circumstance

∑ want to exercise skills they are learning, or have learned, in school or the work place.

∑ want to take on roles and responsibilities their professional work may not provide.

RECRUITMENT OPTIONS

Local Volunteers - these are people who live in the same geographic area as your organization. Such volunteers can be recruited from:
∑ communities of faith (temples, mosques, churches, etc.)
∑ businesses
∑ schools
∑ universities
∑ associations (such as an association of Linux users)
∑ unions
∑ retired persons

The advantage of involving local volunteers:
∑ they do not require any housing accommodations in order to provide service to your organization
∑ they can become local advocates for your organization, spreading your accomplishments through word-of-mouth, which is still be best form of marketing
∑ it shows your organization's commitment to local people, and that you are willing to invite the public into your organization to see first-hand what you are doing

Non-Local Volunteers From Elsewhere in Your Country - these are people who do not live geographically-near your organization, and would need some kind of housing accommodation, and perhaps other support, in order to volunteer at your organization. Accommodations may be secured through their sponsoring organization or through a donor. Such volunteers can be recruited from:
∑ communities of faith (temples, mosques, churches, etc.)
∑ schools
∑ universities
∑ large businesses or corporations
∑ associations (such as an association of Linux users)
∑ United Nations Volunteers (which does sometimes fund so-called "national" volunteers for placements of six months to two years)

International Volunteers -- these are people who do not live in the country where your organization is located, and would need some kind of housing accommodation, and perhaps other support, in order to volunteer at your organization. Accommodations may be secured through their sponsoring organization or through a donor. Such volunteers can be recruited from:
∑ United Nations Volunteers, Peace Corps, GeekCorps, NetCorps Canada, VSO, or other volunteer sending agencies
∑ universities
∑ large businesses or corporations

Online Volunteers -- these are people who may, or may not, live in the country where your organization is located. They may be down the street or around the world. Online volunteering means tasks completed, in whole or in part, by a person via the Internet from a remote computer, usually at home, at work or at a university. It's also

called virtual volunteering, cyber service, telementoring, and various other names. Online volunteering is the same as telecommuting, but instead of employees, it involves volunteers.

There are people all over the world who are helping community technology initiatives, among other types of community work, and there are many, many more who are looking for such opportunities. Such volunteers can be recruited from:
- ∑ www.onlinevolunteering.org
- ∑ www.idealist.org
- ∑ universities
- ∑ large businesses or corporations
- ∑ associations (such as an association of Linux users)

Online volunteers can:
- ∑ translate documents
- ∑ research topics
- ∑ create web pages
- ∑ edit and prepare proposals & press releases
- ∑ contribute to curricula
- ∑ develop databases
- ∑ design graphics
- ∑ offer legal or business expertise
- ∑ tutor students
- ∑ mentor young people
- ∑ moderate online discussion groups
- ∑ manage other online volunteers
- ∑ and more….

As appropriate, you should give ALL of your onsite volunteers the opportunity to complete at least part of their tasks for your organization from their own computers at home, at work or at their university. You can also ask onsite volunteers who are ending their assignments and leaving your geographic area to continue to provide service as online volunteers.

PART 6: OTHER RESOURCES

There are many places to find additional, and more in-depth, information about involving volunteers. The following resources are *highly* recommended to find further resources to support your volunteer-involvement activities, and to find more detailed information about very specific scenarios:

- ∑ How volunteers applying ICT4D are contributing to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) www.unites.org/cfapps/wsis/wsis.cfm Features testimonials from a variety of organizations and their volunteers on how volunteers using ICTs are contributing to the MDGs. Other organizations are strongly urged to contribute their own stories to this section; submission details are on the web site. Presented by the UNITeS initiative.

∑ Profiles of UN Volunteers applying ICT4D,
www.unites.org/html/projects/projects.htm
While UNITeS is *not* limited to only the efforts of UN Volunteers, because
UNV is the home of UNITeS, there is easy access to information on what
UNV is doing regarding ICT4D, and these activities are profiled on the
UNITeS site, to show the possibilities regarding volunteering and ICT4D.

∑ Knowledge Base for ICT Volunteers in Development and International Online
Volunteers, www.unites.org/html/resource/resource.htm
This section offers support materials for volunteers engaged in ICT4D, as
well as online volunteers supporting such onsite volunteers. It features
original articles and presentations, such as how volunteers are using
handheld computer technology as part of their service, as well as links to
many other organizations' resources.

∑ www.serviceleader.org
This site, hosted at the LBJ School of Public Policy at the University of Texas
at Austin, provides extensive information about and links to volunteer
management. You can find information on everything from volunteer liability
to

∑ www.worldvolunteerweb.org
This site evolved from the site for the International Year of Volunteers 2001,
and is a portal to information about volunteer activities and resources.

∑ The Virtual Volunteering Project, www.serviceleader.org/old/vv/
This Project, founded in 1996, is not a matching service but, rather, a
capacity-building tool and research initiative, offering detailed, comprehensive
information for both organizations who want to involve online volunteers and
those who want to volunteer online.

∑ www.onlinevolunteering.org
In addition to being a resource for recruitment of online volunteers, this site
also provides extensive support information to help organizations involve
volunteers more effectively, and to help volunteers provide more effective
support

∑ TechSoup.org
A nonprofit initiative itself, offering nonprofits a one-stop online portal for free
and low-cost technology resources. "We believe that technology can enhance
nonprofit work, making us more efficient and better able to serve our
communities. We never lose sight of that goal." TechSoup provides
instructional articles and worksheets for nonprofit staff members who utilize
information technologies, as well as technology planning information. There
are articles and message boards to support those both those who do not
have much experience using technology and advanced users.

∑ CompuMentor Volunteers
www.compumentor.org/volunteer/
This nonprofit organization is one of the world's oldest and largest nonprofit
technology assistance agencies. Based in San Francisco, California,

CompuMentor has long offered specially-trained volunteers to help nonprofit organizations with technology planning, implementation, and support services. Its section for volunteers is an excellent guide for developing your own program to involve volunteers in a technology-related initiative.

∑   Guía del Voluntariado Virtual
www.voluntariadosocial.info/voluntariadosocial/evoluntas/index.jsp
Guía del Voluntariado Virtual que proporciona en detalle que es el Voluntariado en Red y como se desarrollan las asignaciones del voluntariado en red, asi como varias sugerencias y recursos referente a como usar Internet para manejar voluntarios en red.

∑   e-voluntas
http://listas.us.es/mailman/listinfo/e-voluntas
La lista es un canal para compartir experiencias de intervención e investigación sobre voluntariado, es incluyendo voluntariado en red. Por eso pretende convertirse en una herramienta de investigación-acción que tienda puentes entre los profesionales, los voluntarios y los académicos.

∑   www.energizeinc.com
Energize, Inc. is an internationally-recognized business focused on volunteer management, and its web site provides a plethora of free information, including online books, as well as outstanding fee-based publications by a variety of volunteer management experts.

∑   Kidding Around? Be Serious! A Commitment to Safe Service Opportunities for Young People
by Anna Seidman and John Patterson, © 1996, Nonprofit Risk Management Center (www.nonprofitrisk.org). Chapters include : Risk Relevant Characteristics of Adolescents and Children, General Legal Principles Governing Interaction with Young People in Service, A General Risk Management Process for Dealing with Young People, Approaching Specific Laws and Risks Involving Young People in Service, and Service Scenarios Involving Young Participants.

∑   Screening Volunteers to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse: A Community Guide for Youth Organizations
published by the National Assembly of National Voluntary Health and Social Welfare Organizations (www.nassembly.org).

∑   online discussion groups
These interactive forums allow volunteer managers to interact with each other about various volunteer management issues and to share files and resources. Three of the most popular on www.yahoogroups.com: CyberVPM, sponsored by the Association of Volunteer Administration; OZVPM, focused on Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and other countries "'down under"; and UKVPMs, focused on England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

∑   www.ctcnet.org
The Community Technology Centers' Network (CTCNet) was founded on the recognition that in an increasingly technologically dominated society, people who

are economically disadvantaged will be left further behind if they are not provided access to and training on information tools. CTCNet provides resources and advocacy to improve the quality and sustainability of community technology centers and programs at the local, national and international level.

PART 7: CONCLUSION

This unit has given you a *lot* to think about and, initially, it can seem like it creates more work for your organization, not less. Please note, however, that the information provided in this unit is not based on theory; it is based on actual practice. These materials are focused on what WORKS in making a volunteer involvement scheme effective, and making volunteer involvement worth the effort.