

Virtual Volunteering – Designing Roles and Projects

Guide

Volunteering is evolving alongside changes to working life. Paid employment roles have become more flexible about allowing – or encouraging – people to work from home, and some volunteer roles are following this trend.

For many organisations, the idea of designing virtual volunteer roles can be challenging, especially if volunteers have always carried out their roles onsite. There are questions about reliability, management, supervision, and of course workplace safety and risk management when you do not have direct oversight of what volunteers are doing from home.

Virtual volunteer roles don't suit every organisation, but if you can consider it, it may open opportunities to engage more volunteers, including the chance to engage people or bring skills that would otherwise not be possible.

Volunteering Victoria's Virtual Volunteering Guide is a companion to this guide, providing essential information on managing virtual volunteer programs and volunteers.

What is Virtual Volunteering?

Identify your purpose

Virtual Volunteering is volunteering using the internet, offsite from the organisation in a range of tasks. Some examples of the tasks that can be successfully conducted in a virtual volunteering capacity are as follows:

- researching
- fixing or writing software
- creating web pages or social media and marketing support
- editing or writing proposals, press releases, newsletter articles, etc.
- graphic design
- translating documents
- developing curriculum materials
- database support
- providing legal, business, medical, agricultural or any other expertise
- online mentoring or moderating
- managing other online volunteers
- record keeping or general administration
- virtual reception tasks, answering calls or emails

Virtual roles are generally computer-based, but there are also options for *remote volunteer projects*: practical tasks that a volunteer can take home. Examples could include putting information kits together, envelope stuffing, sewing or woodwork projects, or making phone calls on behalf of the organisation.

Reasons for adding virtual volunteer opportunities to your program

Virtual volunteering has been a growing trend in recent years, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for people to stay at home. It enables people to volunteer when convenient to them (depending on your requirements of course), often in small pockets of time that would not be practical if they had to travel to volunteer in person.

Virtual volunteering also opens doors for your organisation in terms of the skills and experience that you can attract – the best person to carry out a skilled project for you may be based somewhere completely different. Some community members find volunteering in person difficult due to factors such as travel or access issues. Virtual volunteering helps you to open your organisation to broaden volunteer diversity and attract the best person for the role you are offering.

Employee / corporate volunteer opportunities

Virtual volunteering works just as well for corporate teams as well as individual volunteers. A corporate team could help you with a range of tasks such as solving a workflow issue, or writing / designing new promotional materials, building a website – there are plenty of options that a team of employee volunteers could work on together from their office (or from home).

Designing roles and recruiting virtual volunteers

If you'd like to start offering virtual (or remote) volunteer roles, look at your existing volunteer base, and your organisational needs.

Once you have worked out what you want volunteers to do, you will need to write a role description for each position or task before you begin the process of recruitment. Using Volunteering Victoria's Volunteer Management Toolkit will help with this process (chapter 3: Roles, Recruitment and Interviewing).

Don't forget that virtual roles can be substantial and ongoing, with a long-term commitment – but can also be classed as micro-volunteering, where you advertise a short discrete project that a volunteer can complete. For some people, their capacity to commit to regular volunteering is limited – offering small individual tasks is a way that you can still involve them. For others, starting with a small project may lead them to seek larger opportunities for their next volunteer experience.

You can follow your usual processes for advertising roles. Note that many of the online advertising databases give you the chance to advertise virtual roles - these will be visible to volunteers searching for ways they can help from home.

Provide the right resources

When designing virtual volunteer roles, think through the resources that may be needed such as data costs, use of personal phones, printing costs or other consumables etc. Decide what you can offer as part of your program design, and how you will manage reimbursements. For projects that include high computer or phone use, you might choose to include defined expense reimbursements in the position description. If you're providing a resource, like a laptop computer, then a simple agreement will ensure that both the organisation and the volunteer understand ownership of the resource, along with any boundaries that you set for how it can be used, and when it needs to be returned.

Volunteering Victoria's Virtual Volunteering Guide contains a checklist for setting up a safe home workstation.

Workplace safety and risk management

Under the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2010 (Vic) and under equivalent workplace health and safety legislation for organisations also operating outside of Victoria, organisations are expected to ensure that volunteers are not exposed to risks to their health and safety when performing their duties. This is the case regardless of the place of work.

For more information on health and safety obligations for volunteers generally, and in virtual or remote volunteering roles, download the Health and Safety for Volunteers fact sheet and the Virtual Volunteering Guide from Volunteering Victoria.

Staying connected

Once you've set up a virtual (or remote) volunteering program, it's important to stay connected. When volunteers are coming into the office, staying connected is easy through incidental chats and planned meetings. Virtual volunteering requires a plan – you need to make sure that the project is getting done, and that the volunteer feels both supported and appreciated.

Options for doing this can include regular one-to-one contacts by phone or video call, email updates, and team meetings. Don't underestimate the value of a virtual social event every now and then too - set up a phone or video call and invite people to join in for morning tea, lunch, or even an end-of-week catch up. Use the opportunity to keep volunteers updated on the big picture at your organisation, so they continue to feel informed and part of everything that you're doing. A round-the-call check in can cover both the projects that people are working on and is also a chance to share some social chat too.

Volunteering Victoria's Staying Connected with Volunteers COVID-19 Guide has some suggestions on ways to keep in touch with volunteers.

Virtual and remote volunteering is definitely not a 'set and forget' option – they require good structure in setting up the projects and maintaining strong connections with volunteers. However, it is also an amazing opportunity to attract people and skills to your organisation who would not, or could not, volunteer in person. It opens your reach to a much wider range of volunteer skills and experience and gives you the chance to build your volunteer base far beyond the people who can reach your physical locations.