

Volunteering in a Digital World: Opportunities and Risk of Exclusion

Over the last 18 months, Victorians have seen their lives transformed by extended lockdowns and ongoing restrictions. We have had to work, study, and socialise from home. Our whole worlds turned digital and, for most of us, our existence online became second nature. Yet, as part of the *Get Online Week*, the [Good Things Foundation Australia](#) reminds us that 2.5 million Australian are not online and less than 40% of us are confident that we can keep up with technology changes.

Impacts of Digital Exclusion

This means that while the ongoing digital revolution provides the volunteering sector with tremendous opportunities for growth, there remains a real risk of perpetuating the exclusion of many Victorians or leaving smaller volunteer involving organisations (VIO) unable to benefit from the digital reach. As the [Carnegie Trust](#) tells us, the negative impacts of exclusion are tangible and cannot be underestimated. A recent report concluded that the digitally excluded have a significantly higher risk of suffering from loneliness, depression, and economic deprivation. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, communities facing digital barriers are also those under-represented in volunteering. Therefore, such inequity must be met by deliberate and ongoing efforts.

Using a Hybrid Approach

At Volunteering Victoria, we are committed to working with government and partners to create a volunteering sector where [equity, diversity and inclusion](#) are lived values. To do so, we must ensure that the volunteering sector is equipped to combat systemic exclusion by addressing numerous issues linked to digital access, affordability, and ability. Overall, digital initiatives are not sufficient in and of themselves. Face-to-face services remain vital to meet local community needs and play their role as connectors for those of us who would otherwise be excluded. Volunteer leaders across the state, notably through the [Volunteer Support Services Network](#), possess the expertise required to build an equitable volunteering sector where everyone has equal opportunity to participate. To be successful, long-term resourcing needs must be met.

(Re)Building a Fairer Victoria

As Victoria re-emerges from its 6th lockdown, we have the chance to make rebuilding and revitalising communities a tenet for our collective actions. With adequate funding and support, volunteering can be key to Victoria's community recovery. Specifically, we call on the Government, and our members, to:

- Increase access to free Wi-Fi and digital devices for those in low-income households and those suffering disadvantage because of access issues. For example, enabling free internet access and computers in homes for all public housing tenants.
- Support VIOs and volunteers in developing digital literacy and familiarising with digital platforms.
- Support people with disabilities and older Victorians to be able to access appropriate equipment and technology that is best suited to their needs.
- Ensure the availability and accessibility of offline services for those who choose not to use digital services, who struggle to make the transition, or who just fall through the gaps.

At Volunteering Victoria, we believe everyone should be able to access the health, social and connective value that being a volunteer gives to individuals and communities. We are committed to this vision of the future, and we look forward to working with all levels of governments and partners to making it a reality.

