

Modern day workplaces have changed a lot in the past decade and volunteering has too. Recent trends indicate that more and more people are making a switch to working away from the office. Organisations have a number of obligations to their volunteers when entering into a volunteer relationship, even if the volunteer works from home on a computer.

What is Virtual Volunteering?

Virtual Volunteering is volunteering using the internet, offsite from the organisation in a range of tasks. Examples of the tasks that may 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.
- translating documents developing material for a curriculum
- data base support
- providing legal, business, health, or any other expertise
- online mentoring or moderating
- managing other online volunteers

Information and communications technology policies and procedures

Your organisation will likely have information and communications technology protocols. These protocols should take into consideration volunteers working offsite, including guidance and consistency around:

- Cyber security – volunteers connecting to your network, working in an organisation’s cloud or even exchanging emails poses cyber security risks. Is your network protected in these instances? Do you have antivirus software licences which extend to your volunteers?

- Email protocols – you may want to establish an email account for your volunteer to use. This will assist you to keep track of work when the volunteer moves on. A branded email also contributes to a professional and official tone.

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, refer to the VV Guide – ‘Health and Safety’.

Intellectual property and confidentiality

Regardless of where your volunteers are located, Intellectual Property and Confidentiality considerations should not be forgotten to ensure the protection of these valuable assets when outside the organisation's direct control. Refer to our VV Guides - ‘Confidentiality’ and ‘Intellectual Property’ for more information.

THE VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT CYCLE

Our Volunteering Management Toolkit provides a comprehensive guide on the steps organisations should take when recruiting volunteers.

For more information on how your organisations can help volunteers get off to the right start, see our toolkit

The steps set out in each of these guides should be followed with respect to external volunteers. Where practicable, organisations may wish to arrange for volunteers to attend face-to-face induction training, notwithstanding that their volunteer work will ultimately be undertaken remotely.

Re-induction program

Where there are significant gaps between volunteer engagements for any reason, the internal policies or objectives of an organisation may change. It is therefore important that volunteers receive a 'refresher' each time they recommence providing support to an organisation.

Social media

Although the use of social media may be outside the scope of a volunteer's role, it is important that organisations have appropriate policies to deal with its use. Volunteers should clearly understand the organisation's expectations around social media that refers to the organisation and that these expectations apply equally to social media commentary occurring outside the four walls of the organisation's premises.

The Toolkit provide a sample media policy that can be provided to volunteers as well as examples of

Working from home

Where a volunteer is contributing their time online from home, they should be provided with the Work from Home Checklist (provided at the end of this document) to eliminate or manage risks to their health and safety. This Checklist will help virtual volunteers to:

- Review their workstation. This includes having a well-lit area with a desk and chair that is at an appropriate height and provides appropriate lumbar support. The desk must have enough space for the work to be carried out and to allow the screen to be approximately an arm's length away from the person's normal working position.
- Understand the importance of taking regular breaks. It is important volunteers take regular breaks. Being seated in front of a computer for extensive periods may result in eye strain and lumbar pain.
- Realise that additional support is available. Depending on the function the volunteer is performing, it may be necessary to provide professional support. If the volunteer is dealing with information that may cause emotional distress, they should be warned beforehand and then provided the opportunity to contact someone if they are feeling distressed.

Unlawful workplace behaviour

Even though an external volunteer may have limited contact with others, it is essential that they are aware that the organisations policies and procedures continue to apply in relation to issues such as discrimination, sexual harassment, bullying and victimisation.

In some cases, organisations have been found liable for a volunteer's unlawful workplace behaviour.

Ending the volunteer relationship

Given that virtual volunteers will not physically attend the organisation, it is important that ending the relationship is managed in a procedurally fair way that is not different to other volunteers. Clear communication should be used to bring any volunteer relationship to an end, particularly where the ending of a volunteering relationship is not communicated in a face to face or telephone discussion.

Organisations should also mindful of the additional administrative tasks that may need to be undertaken where a remote volunteering relationship is terminated. Arrangements will need to be made to return any equipment, confidential information or other materials that the volunteer has and access to any online systems or materials will need to be suspended.

The Toolkit provides a survey that organisations should provide to all departing volunteers in the aspiration of improving future volunteer experiences at the Organisation. Some steps particularly relevant to external volunteers include:

- Confirm in writing that the volunteer relationship has come to an end and why
- Confirm that the volunteer has returned all property belonging to the Organisation
- Confirm that the volunteer no longer has access to online accounts and materials

Volunteering from home checklist

This checklist should be used as a guide to the types of considerations for assessing whether a home workstation is safe. This checklist is not prescriptive. For any question answered with a 'no', regard should be given to whether any adjustments may be required to ensure that the volunteer is working safely.

1. Workstation

- Is the workstation size adequate for the tasks to be performed? Yes No
- Is there adequate leg space to allow free leg movement under the workstation? Yes No
- Is the work surface a single continuous surface? Yes No
- Is a footrest available? Yes No
- Are the most frequently used items within easy reach from the seated position? Yes No
- Are cables stowed out of the way? Yes No

2. Chair

- Is the chair fully adjustable? Yes No
- Does the chair have a five-star base? Yes No
- Does the chair move freely? Yes No
- Is there adequate lumbar support? Yes No
- Is the padding adequate? Yes No

3. Computer, Screen, Keyboard

- Is the screen approximately arm's length from user? Yes No
- Is the screen height approximately 400mm above work surface? Yes No
- Are characters sharp (no fuzzy edges) standing out against background? Yes No
- Can the screen be adjusted (tilted up and down)? Yes No
- Is there adequate space to use the keyboard in front of the screen? Yes No

4. Mouse

- Is the mouse used on a mouse pad? Yes No
- Is the mouse on the same height surface as the keyboard? Yes No
- Can the mouse be used on either side? Yes No

5. Other Equipment

- Is a printer required? Yes No
- Are documents easy to read and manipulate? Yes No
- Is a headset required? Yes No
- Is there adequate storage space? Yes No

6. Environment

- Is there adequate lighting for the tasks being performed? Yes No
- Can glare be controlled by window coverings? Yes No
- Is the room temperature, humidity and air flow comfortable heating and cooling as required? Yes No
- Has a plan of the home-based site including desk, power outlets, telephone and lighting been provided? Yes No

7. Other Considerations

- Is the floor space free from tripping hazards? Yes No
- Is the PC protected by a circuit breaker and surge protector? Yes No
- Are there adequate power outlets to run the PC and other equipment? Yes No
- Are all power cables, leads, power boards etc in good condition and have a current test and tag? Yes No
- Is there a functioning smoke detector in the house? Yes No
- Is there safe access and exit provided? Yes No
- Has the volunteer completed WHS training? Yes No