

Chapter 63

The Promise of Information and Communication Technology in Volunteer Administration

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ABSTRACT

Traditional volunteer management is a bureaucratic process involving recruitment, screening, training, assignment, scheduling, recognition, retention, and reporting on volunteers. New workplace technologies provide ways to conduct these tasks with greater efficiency and increased accuracy, thereby enhancing both the volunteer experience and the impact of volunteers on organizational operations. This chapter reviews the literature regarding theories of technology acceptance and use, technology use in nonprofit organizations, and technology in volunteer programs. Three organizational case studies provide insights into both the promise and limitations of the adoption and use of Volgistics, a commonly used Web-based software designed for volunteer management in nonprofit organizations. The authors conclude by discussing what these cases suggest for the challenges and promise of adoption of new technology in the management of volunteers.

THE PROMISE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION

Like any complex organization, nonprofit organizations have differentiated functions that operate relatively independently as parts of a larger goal-oriented system. Technology used in accounting works independently from project management systems. With some exceptions, technology used in human

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resources works independently from resource development systems. Jaskyte (2012) documents willingness by nonprofits to innovate across these administrative, service, and marketing domains, but underscores the complexities in how multiple systems operate to satisfy organizational goals. In this chapter, we concentrate on the use of technology in the management of volunteers, a discrete and identifiable function in many nonprofit organizations. Volunteer administration is carried out in different ways in organizations that use volunteers (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013; Hager, 2013), but the function has nonetheless become increasingly defined by professional standards and procedures (Brudney & Heinlein, 2013). New technology to facilitate volunteer administration has been slow to develop, however, and the field of practice has been slow to adopt it. In this chapter, we concentrate on the adoption and use of one of the most commonly used volunteer management software systems used by nonprofit organizations in the United States: *Volgistics*. The experience of the three cases we studied provides a snapshot of what current technologies bring to productivity enhancements in nonprofit organizations that rely on volunteers to carry out their missions.

The value of new technologies to volunteer administration is clear. New software programs and online tools have streamlined and automated many tasks that were once tediously carried out with clipboard, paper, and pencil. However, as with any new technology, potential users can resist implementation. The current potential, use, and limitations of technology in volunteer administration are the subjects of our chapter.

BACKGROUND

Traditional Volunteer Management

Many nonprofit organizations rely on volunteers to help them achieve their mission (Urban Institute, 2004). Volunteers complete a wide range of tasks to assist nonprofits in their operations, from preparing mailings or providing customer service to using professional skills such as Web design or accounting. Depending on the nature of the organization and the size of its volunteer program, the way volunteers are managed varies (Macduff, Netting & O'Connor, 2009). However, some tasks are common across the sector, and many organizations pay homage to a canon of practices (Safrit & Schmiesing, 2012) defined as essential to the effective management of volunteers.

Most volunteer management practices are ripe for technological innovation. Volunteer managers carry out many of the functions associated with a human resources department, but for unpaid workers. A volunteer resource manager may work independently or with a team. The manager or team must establish what volunteers can do for the organization, a task that includes communicating with paid staff to assess needs, creating volunteer position descriptions, and determining what type of person to look for to fill that position (McCurley & Lynch, 2011). The volunteer manager must attract, recruit, and screen potential volunteers (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008). This includes spreading the word about the volunteer program through various channels and creating a volunteer application to gather necessary information about volunteers. The volunteer manager must screen applicants, a process that can differ from organization to organization. Some organizations have a simple interview to find a good position match; others require background checks, interviews, and verification of references (Abel, Wiegel, Jordan, Harlow, Hsu & Martinez, 2012). Regardless of variations across organizations, the goal for the volunteer

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