

# VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING AND DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

*a qualitative investigation.*

*make a difference*



**volunteering**  
queensland



# Background

Digital engagement is the label given to the manner in which members of the global community are reached and mobilised for action via information and communication technology (ICT). As an extension of traditional methods of engagement, digital tools can often be taken for granted and under-utilised by organisations. This research has sought to uncover the particularities of digital engagement and more specifically, the practice of virtual volunteering, to outline the key considerations for practitioners as well as the future possibilities for innovators. Virtual volunteering has been an established practice for at least the past decade, most strongly evidenced by the publication of *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook* and the establishment of the United Nations Volunteers Online Volunteering Service.

At the fundamental level, virtual volunteering can be seen simply as an extension of volunteer engagement into the realm of digital technology. Similar considerations are involved in planning, implementing, and administering a virtual volunteering and traditional, face-to-face volunteering program. These considerations – such as the importance of clarity of purpose in planning, ensuring sufficient resources are in place to meet the needs of staff, volunteers, and clients, and screening potential volunteers for suitability – are discussed in detail in *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook*.

Quality and regular communication between the organisation and volunteer is emphasised as crucial to the success of a virtual volunteering program. Removing the familiarity and comfort that develops naturally with face-to-face interaction makes this aspect of volunteer engagement paramount in the digital environment. The basic considerations in this respect are to ensure that communication channels are open and easily accessible, as well as routine communication at regular and frequent intervals.

Within this outline of virtual volunteering and digital engagement lie several opportunities for innovation and development for practice. As evidenced by the research findings detailed below, many of these innovations are already being practiced. The utilisation of social media as a powerful tool for volunteer engagement is a particularly prominent area for consideration. A major advantage of this form of communication is its (relatively) open and reciprocal nature. Members of the community are able to actively engage with an organisation in a public forum, as opposed to the unidirectional medium of a website and the privacy of email and other forms of digital communication.

The prominence of virtual volunteering in Australia is another area that needs addressing. The impression arising from our research is that, while many organisations are engaged in practices that fit within the conception of digital engagement, it is not considered as being distinct from other, more traditional, ways of operating. It is likely that this lack of direction and clear definition of digital practice is resulting in an under-utilisation of the potential of such technology. Encouraging youth to take a leadership role in the development of virtual volunteering and digital engagement could be a viable and positive option for organisations, governments and peak bodies. Centrally involving young people makes sense because of their collective natural familiarity with this form of communication.

These preliminary findings guided our investigation into the practice of virtual volunteering and the utilisation of tools for digital engagement in the not-for-profit sector. We conducted in-depth interviews with five diverse organisations, took a close look at the practice of three organisations in the form of case studies, and undertook a crowdsourcing experiment on Twitter. The findings are presented below, followed by a discussion of their significance for policy and practice.

# Credits

This research was undertaken by Volunteering Qld as part of our innovative engagement initiatives. The research was authored by James Schier, Erin Gregor and Sarah McAtamney and supervised by Mark Creyton.

## Qualitative analysis

The manner in which organisations engage with volunteers via digital technologies varied amongst the organisations we interviewed. This diversity is due to a number of factors; most prominently the various types of work the organisations undertake, the size of the organisation, and the available resources. Virtual volunteering is practiced to varying degrees by all of the organisations we met with, but it does not generally seem to be pursued in a manner which differentiates it from volunteering broadly. All of the organisations have a presence on social media, with a similar level of divergence in attitudes and action from one to the next.

Green Cross, a not-for-profit organisation that helps people adapt to our changing climate in ways that embrace sustainability and community resilience, is a very small organisation with only four full time staff members. Given the lack of time and resources to manage a volunteering program, virtual volunteering is a perfect solution for Green Cross. It relies heavily on interested parties finding them. Once potential volunteers find Green Cross, their skills and available time is matched to tasks available with the organisation. This skill matching of roles even extends to encouraging feedback from individuals engaged with Green Cross, from which new tasks sometimes arise. One particularly positive aspect of virtual volunteering in this organisation is the engagement with corporate volunteers, whom, for example, completed a large portion of the technical work required to implement the Harden Up initiative. Anecdotally this kind of flexibility with volunteers and volunteer tasks is typical of younger and smaller organisations such as Green Cross.

In contrast, UnitingCare Community is a very large not-for-profit organisation, with approximately 5,600 volunteers and 2,600 employees. The majority of their virtual volunteering roles occur in traditional areas such as research and technical assistance, and similar to Green Cross, are generally project based. Broadly speaking, UnitingCare Community are looking at expanding the opportunities they offer to volunteers into areas such as creative industries. One example offered was a filmmaker working with people with a disability. Their work around suicide and crisis support has led UnitingCare Community to consider the use of volunteers in direct client contact for suicide prevention and support after suicide.

We also looked at Surf Lifesaving Queensland where we saw variation within the organisation since each club administers its own volunteer engagement and therefore have control over the way in which this is done. This of course enables clubs to choose the level of virtuality of engagement with their volunteers, which would appear the only feasible way to proceed for Surf Lifesaving Queensland given the highly autonomous nature of individual clubs. Given that the core function of this organisation is an inherently face-to-face activity, it is understandable that Surf Lifesaving Queensland is not as driven to adopt a high level of virtuality as organisations such as ReachOut.com and Green Cross.

Cost efficiency is a major driving force behind the use of digital tools to engage with volunteers. The Multicultural Development Association (MDA) and ReachOut.com both cited the need to extend their geographical reach within financial constraints as a primary reason for utilising technology, and Green Cross would be far less likely to have the presence they do without capitalising so intelligently on the resources of volunteers via digital communication.

Most of the organisations use social media for divulging information to their supporters and engaging with interested members of the community. UnitingCare Community utilise social media to recruit connected individuals to volunteer for events, similar to crowdsourcing. Organisations such as ReachOut.com are fully aware of the power and drawbacks of social media, whilst others such as MDA acknowledge their fear that they may be “missing a trick” when it comes to social media engagement. This insight links closely to the role of young people in digital forms of engagement: ReachOut.com is an organisation utterly absorbed in the world of young people and therefore far more likely to seek out this medium for engagement.

Face-to-face interaction prevails as an important element of engagement for many of the organisations consulted. MDA and ReachOut.com utilise digital communication with the common purpose of extending their geographical reach, but the relationship between online and face-to-face communication varies greatly. The role played by MDA volunteers is a face-to-face one, providing support to migrants as they adjust to life in a foreign community, with digital communication utilised to liaise between volunteer and manager. ReachOut.com is essentially an online service that provides young people with information, advice and connections to manage mental health difficulties, but as is outlined in the case study below, face-to-face engagement has proved irreplaceable when the involvement of young people increases.

Crowdsourcing is a form of engagement that deserves a more thorough investigation to better understand when and how it is most effective for non-government organisations. Of the five organisations interviewed, only three were familiar with the concept, and only one stated that they were employing it – UnitingCare Community. UnitingCare Community use it mainly for sourcing volunteers for events – times when a large number of people are required for a short period of time. This is done using social media, and this is seen as the most useful function of social media for volunteer engagement by this organisation. Green Cross stated familiarity with the concept and they have considered capitalising upon it for some projects, but decided they were not ready for it at this point. Surf Lifesaving Queensland also expressed they had thought about the possibility of using crowdsourcing, but it did not seem a priority for the peak body. Once again, it is a case where the individual clubs are probably better placed to digitally engage with volunteers than Surf Lifesaving Queensland itself. ReachOut.com and MDA were both unaware of the concept, although it is interesting to note that the call for a spokesperson via social media described by ReachOut.com can unproblematically be categorised as crowdsourcing.

Talking to these organisations of various size and purpose highlights the diversity of use and potential for digital communication tools in the volunteer sector. In general the impression is that technology broadens and deepens the engagement with the community, whether this be simply connecting with individuals via social media or the organisational website, or engaging people to work as virtual volunteers. Evidence shows that the size of the organisation and the nature of work undertaken by the respective organisations has a big impact on the uptake of digital technologies for volunteer engagement. In the case of Green Cross, scarce resources was a reason for using digital technologies while for MDA, fewer resources proved to be a barrier for implementing such technologies. Expanding the geographical reach of the organisation was a commonly cited motivation, with the main differences lying in the level of virtuality sought and attained by each organisation. There is already a good uptake of digital technologies by a number of these organisations, but there are also some missed opportunities for strengthening the relationship with the community with the aid of such means.

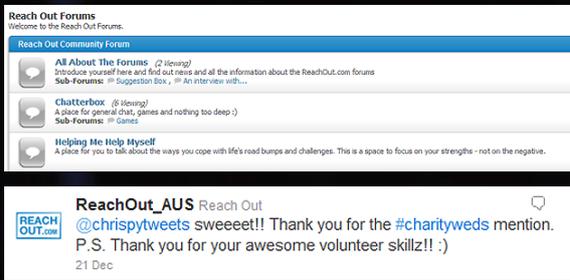
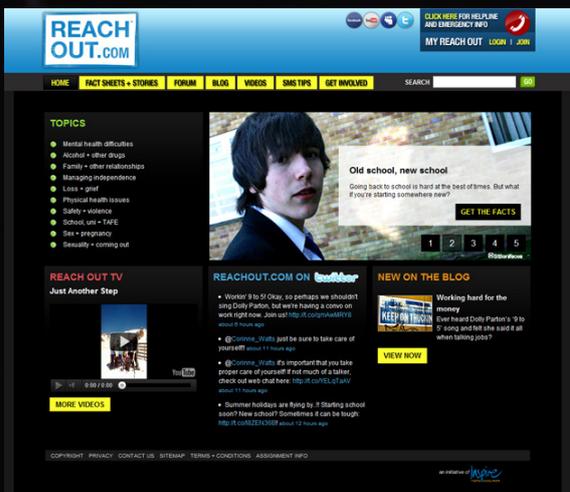
# ReachOut.com *Nicole Thomas*

ReachOut.com is a web-based mental health service for young people aged 14-25. It provides information and support for dealing with mental health issues, and an online community where young people can interact in an environment they find comfortable.

ReachOut.com primarily engages volunteers on a project basis, advertising for positions as the need arises. The tasks and roles offered are predominately online, and are preceded by a three day workshop to develop the appropriate skills and to build rapport. These workshops are part of a "Special Projects" initiative, which links young people with roles as online community facilitators, online content creation (which usually becomes a paid role as a "ReachOut Reporter"), participation in advisory boards, and spreading the word about ReachOut.com in their local community as Youth Ambassadors. They have had some success with online skills development, but this has only been effective when complemented by face-to-face engagement.

Social media plays a secondary role in the engagement process for ReachOut.com. It is used mainly to direct young people connected with the organisation to content on the website, upcoming events, and forum discussions. The forum is preferred because of the security and confidentiality afforded by this moderated communication medium. This form of communication also gives everyone an equal opportunity to express their opinion, overcoming the uncomfortable and confronting aspects of social interaction many of the young people engaged with ReachOut.com experience. It was however noted that social media is useful when something needs urgent action, with the example of ReachOut.com needing a spokesperson on Triple J at short notice with someone being sourced from their Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Providing their services online is the only way ReachOut.com is able to stay relevant to their mission, by connecting with a diverse section of the population. Improvements in communication infrastructure, particularly the roll-out of the National Broadband Network, are seen as presenting significant opportunities for developing the content and engagement potential of ReachOut.com.





# Soften the Fck Up *Ehon Chan*

National mental health campaign, Soften the Fck Up, encourages men to talk about life's challenges rather than keep their feelings bottled up. Suicide is the number one cause of death among young people and almost 80% of all suicides are men. Soften the Fck Up aims to reduce these staggering statistics by discouraging "tough guy", "real man" and "harden up" stigma that is so prevalent in Australian society.

Soften the Fck Up has involved extensive virtual volunteering with both high and low levels of commitment. At the upper extreme, the campaign has engaged the voluntary services of notable, well followed bloggers to post about mental health issues. These bloggers contribute lengthy, often insightful and sometimes controversial content that is open and honest about the challenges of mental illness. They broach previously taboo topics in the interest of creating an open dialogue in the online context as well as throughout wider society.

Under each blog, there is a comments section where readers can leave their thoughts. The site is well integrated with social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to allow seamless sharing. The real value of the campaign is the ease with which these messages can be shared through online platforms and, therefore, the dissemination of this information is as easy as one click.

For those that want to become part of the campaign, Soften the Fck Up have created a "Manifesto of Real Men" where men can sign up and commit to the movement. The manifesto includes such lines as, "I am tough enough to admit faults. I am strong enough to look after my family, my mates, people around me and myself. I am man enough to have the tough conversations." Offering this simple option allows people to become part of the movement and may lead to greater involvement down the track.

**What Stops Blokes**

**WHAT STOPS BLOKES**

Seeing it as a Failure "Pull up your socks" "Get on with it" "Don't be a girl" "Suck it up" "Don't get all emotional" "Be a man about it" the list could go on forever. Whether you're aware of it or not living in Australia these messages are taken in and often become rules or beliefs that we don't stop to question. Australian men are born into a culture where we're expected to successfully cope with our difficulties by ourselves. If we can't we've failed. More often than not the younger blokes who come to my counselling practice are at breaking point, they've tried everything they can and come to see me as a

Posted by Paul Cullen on 24/08/11

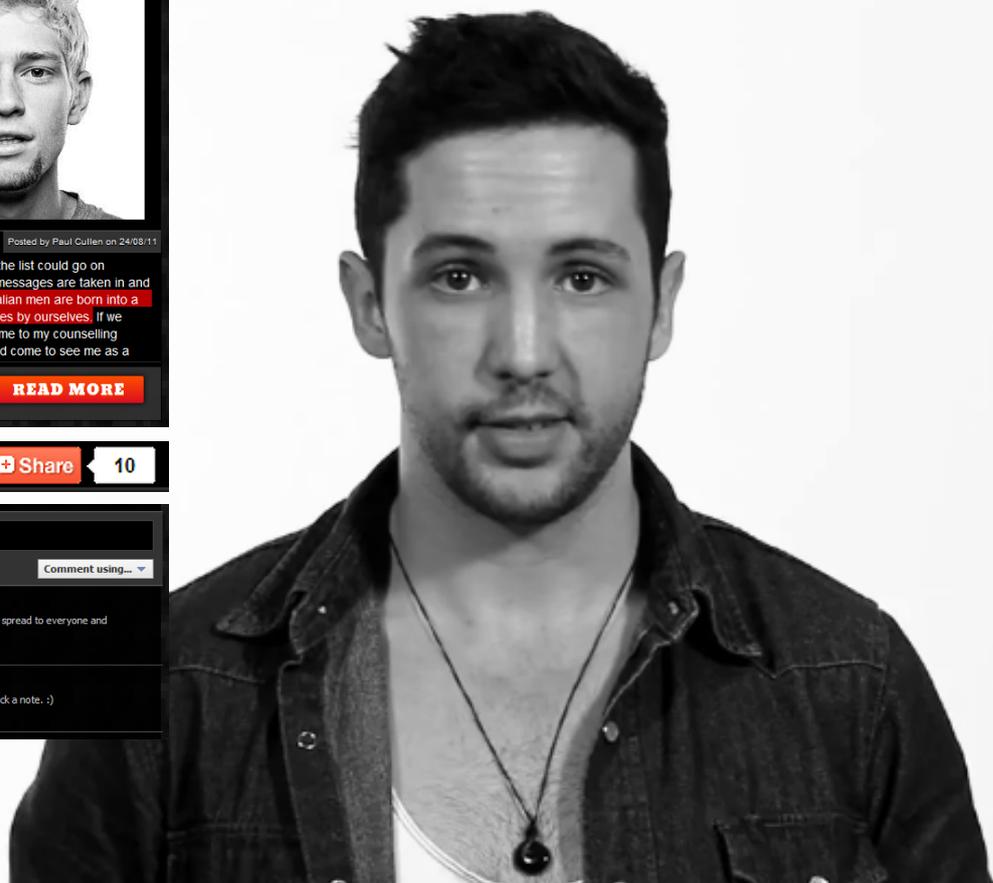
**POSTED UNDER TAGS** [feelingcrap](#), [bingedrinking](#), [careerpressure](#), [sexuality](#), [breakup](#), [peerpressure](#) **READ MORE**

Like 12 Tweet 47 Share 10

Add a comment...

**Iain Burgess** · Tamworth, New South Wales  
... oh my god, you wonderfull thing you, if there is one message we need spread to everyone and anyone about depression, this is it in a nutshell.  
Reply · Like · October 21, 2011 at 10:30pm

**William Wander** · Queensland  
Cheers Iain! Always like being called wonderful and glad it struck a note. :)  
Reply · Like · October 25, 2011 at 5:22am



# Volunteering Qld TV *Vanessa Codling*

Volunteering Qld TV is a YouTube channel that features videos on interesting volunteer experiences, innovative volunteer management and community resilience. Videos are easy-to-digest, informative and engaging. They encourage potential volunteers to get involved, inspire volunteer managers to improve their practice and support Queensland communities to build resilience to natural disasters.

Volunteering Qld TV currently features 78 videos with 11,000+ views. Highlights include a short film on the Innovate Symposium, the Abbey Medieval Festival volunteer program, animations for both International Volunteer Managers Day and International Volunteer Day and the Premier's message of support for Queensland's One Million Stars Challenge. The most popular video to date is Susan Ellis discussing how it takes a whole organisation to manage volunteers.

Volunteering Qld TV shares volunteering ideas in an entertaining, new way. Existing thanks to the advancement and affordability of in-house movie producing, the explosion of broadband internet for video streaming, and the ease of content sharing via many online devices (smart-phones, tablets, laptops, PCs) and on social media (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter). The channel embodies a do-it-yourself attitude for pre-production, production and post-production. The videos are created in-house at Volunteering Qld and enable those involved to learn new skills such as reporting, filming and editing.

Film, journalism and communications volunteers provide vital support to produce the content and explore different storytelling approaches. Roles are mainly project-based, with volunteers helping out when their schedules allow it. While many tasks are completed virtually, face-to-face communication and feedback are vital to drive each video to completion. Volunteering Qld TV volunteers benefit thorough skill development, coverage of their work and content for their show-reels.

The future possibilities for Volunteering Qld TV are many. Inspiring viewers to embrace their inner-filmmaker and submit their own volunteer stories or volunteer management tips. Exploring more stories of creativity and innovation in the volunteering sector. And in the months to come, the launch of Volunteering Banned, an experimental, fictional web series, which aims to elicit curiosity around Volunteering Qld's mission of creating a world where everyone can make a difference.



The image shows a screenshot of the Volunteering Qld TV YouTube channel page. The channel has 25 subscribers and 10,657 views. The featured video is "Innovate Symposium [Part 3 - Working in and with Communities]" by VolunteeringQldTV, uploaded 2 weeks ago. Below the video player is a comment from Kerrytoby: "Great event. Great speaker. Great Volunteer Managers. You people do such great work for our society." The comment is from 7 months ago. At the bottom, there is a social media post from VolunteeringQld: "New videos up on #vqtv - Redfest [youtu.be/g-tWyu8MZ8A](https://youtu.be/g-tWyu8MZ8A) and Ready Readers [youtu.be/g6byXmrtTPY](https://youtu.be/g6byXmrtTPY)" dated 12 Dec.

# Crowdsourcing experiment

In order to put the power of crowdsourcing to the test, Volunteering Qld facilitated a small scale crowdsourcing experiment, asking people to share their thoughts on virtual volunteering via Twitter. The conversation starting tweets included, "All this week we are researching the practice + potential of virtual volunteering – Join the discussion #virtvol" and "What does virtual volunteering mean to you? Share your ideas, tell your stories #virtvol."

In total, there were 100 tweets about virtual volunteering and Volunteering Qld tweeted 34 times to keep the conversation active over the one week timeframe. To build momentum Volunteering Qld, Emergency Volunteering, Ehon Chan and Jenny Geale all participated with regular tweeting. This spread the experiment to a wider base of followers and brought more contributors into the conversation. Here are some of the responses:

“ I know @RoomtoRead\_Oz used graphic designers sourced on twitter as #virtvol on short-notice/short-term projects eg events @VolunteeringQld

jennygeale 

“ @VolunteeringQld plenty of #NFPs request volunteers on our VolMatch service that don't require any actual face time- just online #virtvol

ProBonoAust 

“ @VolunteeringQld I translate, review work, and consult to an Indonesian organisation through the internet. #virtvol

georgedarroch 

“ RT @jennygeale: The @Starts\_at\_Home Campaign is a good eg of how tech/media has changed volunteering - sharing stories in the fight against poverty #virtvol

martinjcowling 

“ @VolunteeringQld - lots of examples re how people volunteer online at wikipedia / #virtualvolunteering en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virt... #voluntweet

jcravens42 

“ RT @VolunteeringQld: Lots of content about online / virtual volunteering at t.co/6Gv4ULom #virtvol

MattAnderson\_ 

“ @ehon hundreds of virtual advocates showed support for @thankyouWATER and helped us get into 7-eleven..

morganranieri 

“ @VolunteeringQld I #virtvol as a consumer reviewer of systematic reviews of health interventions for @cochraneollab worldwide project

traceyvireo 

“ We think www.sparked.com is an excellent example of online volunteering - although best for web, design work. What do you think? #virtvol

fya\_org\_au 

In general this was an illuminating experiment in crowdsourcing, with a variety of organisational and individual users providing feedback, suggesting both the extent of the practice of virtual volunteering and the potential of crowdsourcing on Twitter. However, some limitations with the process were evident. Many of the respondents gave similar information to one another, resulting in redundancies, possibly due to the fact that respondents may not have seen what others were tweeting. There was also the issue of some tweets not utilising the hashtag #virtvol, making collation of responses difficult and possibly resulting in some feedback being missed. These are perhaps merely costs incurred by having such an open conversation with people and groups from across the world. On the contrary, the benefits of such a process can far outstrip these inconveniences.

By using online social media to start a conversation, hear other opinions and share ideas, organisations can harness the collective knowledge of virtual communities. Most of the contributors to this particular Twitter experiment enjoyed bouncing virtual volunteering descriptions and concepts off each other. This demonstrates the inherent collaborative nature of social media.

# Virtual volunteering and digital engagement: You know what it is, now here's how to get started

- Liaise with senior staff/managers of your organisation to identify if a virtual volunteering program is a concept they would like to implement. This should also include identifying if the relevant resources are available.
- Again, working with senior staff/managers, develop a strategy to engage new volunteers - virtual volunteering is about getting new people with new skills and ideas.
- Once it's been agreed there is room for a virtual volunteering program, identify what tasks and projects your organisation has that volunteers may be able to perform virtually.
- Then you should 'screen' or match these tasks to your volunteers' skills.
- Propose the concept of virtual volunteering to the people you think are suitable to make sure this is something they would like to do.
- Provide virtual volunteers with clear, well defined tasks and where they can find/access/use the relevant resources.
- Maintain regular and open communication with virtual volunteers.
- If appropriate, create a virtual space for virtual volunteers to communicate and share ideas with each other, and with staff.
- Invite virtual volunteers to events and seminars so they feel included.
- If you have profiles of your organisation's staff, create a profile for all your virtual volunteers as well.
- Work with senior staff/managers to see if social media is a platform your organisation may benefit from and identify how your virtual volunteers may be able to assist in your social media strategy.
- If social media is appropriate, allocate who in the organisation will be responsible for managing social media including monitoring and updating (Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc).
- Measure the effectiveness of virtual volunteering and digital engagement by comparing the time tasks take when completed virtually compared to face-to-face or at an office, quality of work, resources saved, and how it may be better for the environment (fewer cars on the road) while reducing the organisation's carbon footprint (fewer people physically working at the organisation results in less power/energy being used).
- Communicate to your staff that volunteers may work virtually so they are aware of the concept. They too may be able to identify tasks volunteers can perform virtually.
- Regularly seek feedback from volunteers working virtually to make sure they're happy and feel included.
- Respond to virtual volunteers in a timely manner, thank them for their work and involve them where possible.
- Most importantly, show you appreciate their efforts. Showing you support them whether they're working virtually or not, helps to build long-term, productive working relationships with them and they may become ambassadors to other potential volunteers if they feel content, valued and supported.

You can also download *The Virtual Volunteering Guidebook* for tips and information on virtual volunteering.



