Technical Volunteer Web
Interim Project Report
September 2001

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Introduction

The Technical Volunteer Web project is developing a set of practices for connecting technical volunteers in voluntary sector organizations with a
larger technical resource network that can provide additional recruitment, training and support to complement the non-profit organization's volunteer program.

Objectives

This Interim Report discusses the activities undertaken toward our project deliverables as follows:

iv.   develop orientation, training and mentorship programs for technical volunteers …
v.   develop presentation kit for voluntary organizations…
vi.   develop tool kit of appropriate help and support documents…
vii.   begin placement of volunteers…

The Participatory Evaluation process is also addressed, with an Interim Report attached as appendix 1.

Since our last report and submission of presentation kits, the processes for recruitment, orientation, training and placement of technical volunteers have evolved significantly. Work has been done on collaboration tools, presentation materials and resources, and a number of exciting technical projects are being completed by volunteers (appendix 2). Many of these projects will benefit non-profits developing their use of the Internet and other information technologies.

Orientation, Training and Mentorship

Recruitment
Since the beginning of the project (December 2000), seventy-four volunteers have been recruited, with thirty-five of those still active as of September 28, 2001.

Extensive outreach and recruitment efforts coincided with the lead-up to the two-month practicum term of the Vancouver Community College Information Technology Specialist program in July.   Students and volunteers were offered a full week of orientation and hands-on training (appendix 3). The objective was to give the full-time students the benefit of immersion into the overall activities and goals of the Vancouver CommunityNet and its community partners in order to enhance their ability to integrate and perform their work over their term. Other new and currently active volunteers with more limited schedules could take advantage of training that would meet their specific objectives and availability.

Thirteen volunteers, including two Vancouver Community College practicum students, were recruited to start on July 3rd in User Support, Web Design, Technical and Training positions. Existing volunteers were prepared to provide mentorship within ongoing projects and roles, and were on-hand for the training and orientation week. Of those thirteen new volunteers, five left within the month and two remain active at the time of this report (not quite three months later). Considerable work was accomplished by a few of them through the summer. Several volunteers were deployed to work with other non-profits in their Community Access (CAP) Site installation and user support and several are working on systems administration and content development projects.

Following the July intake and orientation, the volunteer program was re-examined and many changes have been made in the past few months. The recruitment, screening and intake procedures were re-designed to better balance the needs of the Vancouver Community Network to achieve its goals of providing public access and community content while addressing the objectives of the project and the volunteer and student expectations.

New web pages describing VCN's volunteer program were designed and the online Volunteer Application Form continues to undergo changes to enable better screening of applicants (http://www.vcn.bc.ca/vcn/volunteer). The general Volunteer Information Session offered twice monthly is no longer being held. Prospective volunteers are instead invited to attend a long-standing weekly First Time User Introduction to VCN and the Internet to find out more about the Vancouver Community Network and its mandate before applying. New interview forms and questions have been developed to better explore how the applicant's objectives and experience match those of the TVW, VCN and community partners.

Orientation, Training and Mentorship
All volunteers were previously placed for a period of orientation in User Support, before moving on to other positions and duties. User Support is an extremely difficult and complex job requiring exceptional interpersonal and problem-solving skills and experience. Although it is an excellent position in which to develop those skills and to become integrated within a non-profit technical support role, this is not easily acquired, and the staff support required to orient and train short-term volunteers is not conducive to sustainability and efficient use of

resources and time.

Rather than requiring this period of orientation in User Support of all volunteers, recruitment now specifically targets people interested in User Support and Training, Public Access Support, or Community Content Development.   New volunteers are now required to attend a full-day Basic Orientation and Training session (appendix 4) in all aspects of VCN's work and community initiatives, and are then placed directly into these new pools, which work more broadly toward the VCN and TVW goals and mandate.

Small teams develop within these pools to work on specific projects, and the whole group, including staff, comes together in regular meetings to discuss progress, problems, upcoming priorities and work to be done for VCN and other non-profits. New volunteers can be integrated into work underway or be assigned to new projects. It is hoped that, over time, this team development model will better respond to the ebb and flow of new and returning volunteers, with longer-term volunteers providing mentorship and orientation.

Ongoing Training For All Non-Profit Technical Volunteers
A comprehensive training series has been developed in coordination with the Community Access Program (CAP), Community Learning Networks (CLN) and "604 Connect!" projects. In keeping with the goal of developing a sustainable network of technical volunteers supporting each other and the non-profits they work with, sessions in Basic Skills, User Support, Intermediate Skills and HTML are being offered to volunteers and staff of all organizations over the next several months.   Curricula for the Basic Skills and User (Technical Train-the-Trainer) Support sessions are attached as appendices 5a -d. In addition, VCN continues to offer weekly sessions for individuals and groups (appendices 5e-f). Attendance at these sessions has been increasing as people who want to volunteer at CAP locations become aware of them.

Presentation Kit for Non-Profits

The Information Brochure (appendix 6) circulating to non-profits highlights the networking efforts of the project and encourages organizations and their volunteers to get involved in the Technical Volunteer Network by taking advantage of the training on offer.   It is estimated that about 300 volunteers will take advantage of these opportunities to enhance their own technical skills and the ability to help others to use computers and the Internet.

Research on Internet resources for non-profits has uncovered a huge number of sites dedicated to non-profit management, 'virtual volunteer' program development, and technology, respectively. A selection of sites that combine all of these three subjects to address the information needs of 'non-profits working with technical volunteers' has been posted to the project website (http://www.vcn.bc.ca/vcn/involve/npresrce.html) (appendix 7). In addition, resources for technical volunteers are being gathered, and some of these will be of particular interest to non-profits trying to find free and easily accessible tools for their Internet use.

Help and Support Documents

A comprehensive Volunteer Manual has been produced and contains: VCN Policies and Procedures; Internet Account Registration, Troubleshooting and Problem Tracking; and Help Pages on configuring accounts and Internet software programs (appendix 8a-zz). These documents are currently being converted to HTML by volunteers so that help is available regardless of where the volunteer is located. These support documents and sources of other help will also be useful to other non-profits.

An online collaboration tool, called Twiki, is under investigation by volunteers to see how it might be used to make VCN's Help Pages more dynamic and easy to update. TWiki (www.twiki.org) is an open-source web-based group collaboration tool which can be used to help a group of people 'grow' a website. If found to be effective, this tool may be adapted by community groups for use in their websites. Fuller details on this project are available in the excerpts from our Request Tracker Job Jar Queue attached as Appendix 2. The Request Tracker itself provides a collaboration space where volunteers log their activities and solutions to problems, enabling their expertise to be accessed by other volunteers who face similar problems, particularly in providing User Support, on- or off-site.

(It should be noted that considerable work was completed on the Twiki project during the summer, but a drive failure on the VCN's server at the beginning of August destroyed it, as well as a great deal of 'organizational history' developed through the Request Tracker. The work had to be re-done to meet this report deadline, although the data recovery process may still retrieve some of it.)

Placement of Volunteers with Non-profits

All VCN volunteers are contributing to the objectives of the Technical Volunteer Web project, either directly on the site of the community group or on VCN's site developing systems, networks and community content under the guidance of VCN's staff and project coordinators. In the technical and 'virtual' volunteering world, physical location becomes less important.

Since June, thirteen volunteers have been working on Public Access Site Installation and User Support in seven community locations. The expectation is that the Public Access volunteers will continue to help with technical troubleshooting and upgrading of equipment on an on-call basis at sites they have been assigned to, and User Support volunteers are staffing the sites on a regular schedule as requested by the organization. Of those thirteen volunteers, eight are still actively volunteering on a regular weekly schedule either at the VCN site or a public access site; two of those eight have just started with VCN on a full-time internship through YES Canada's Shamrock project.

The sites receiving direct on-site VCN Technical Volunteer help to date are:

    127 Housing Society
    411 Seniors Centre/VCN CAP and Learning Lab
    Vancouver Arts and Cultural Alliance
    The Lions Den

Co-op Radio
Spartacus Books
Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre

These sites have been asked to participate in the baseline indicators survey as part of the Participatory Evaluation, which is reported on in appendix 1. The survey has been circulated to all volunteers to inform and encourage them to develop their own ideas about how the collective goals can be reached.

A further 23 CAP sites have been slated for development and volunteer recruitment and deployment will be established accordingly. In addition, seventy-five more groups are being recruited under the "604 Connect!" third round, and many of these organizations will benefit from the Technical Volunteer Network.

In addition to direct physical deployment of volunteers to perform this work for these organizations, several other volunteers are actively involved in community content and network development projects that will not only benefit the specific groups we're working with, but may also serve as prototypes for the development of similar projects by other Community Networks and non-profits.

These technical projects are detailed in Appendix 2, but a few of them warrant special attention here, particularly as they contribute to sustainable, open source projects that are transferable within the non-profit community:

Humanities 101 Learning Lab: VCN has agreed to help the Humanities 101 society prepare a computer learning lab in the downtown eastside. The lab will have the capacity for 30 workstations connected over a local area network in a single large room. The 30 workstations are 486 computers donated to the VCN from the Vancouver Public Library, and will run open source applications from two Debian Linux Applications Servers in order to avoid the high costs of buying Microsoft licenses and having higher end computers properly work. This is a very complex network development project involving five volunteers at one point. The set-up will soon be tested on-site at VCN, and when established on the Humanities 101 site, will require ongoing technical support as well as user support for the organization's volunteers and users.

WestCoast Child Care Resource Centre Database: VCN's role in a partnership project with the WestCoast Child Care Resource Centre is to help them create a jobs database. The jobs database would help child care givers find employment within the BC region. We have had several meetings with them and they have given us an example they would like us to use in our development. Some preliminary work on the database design and search and browse templates have been done. The next phase of this job is to take the prototype into completion and demonstrate it to WCCRC, who would then demonstrate to others. One VCN volunteer has been assigned directly to this project, with a few others on standby to provide design and graphics assistance.

Surrey Self-Advocacy Learning Network Database: We have received a request from the project proposal co-ordinator for the Surrey Self-Advocacy Learning Network, to place

the results of a questionnaire they have conducted in five focus groups on a public website. The results are currently formatted in a structured Word document. One volunteer has been assigned to create a one-table database in mySQL to hold the questionnaire results and import the data into it. At least one other volunteer will be assigned to create CGI forms to search and browse the database and show the results in html pages.

The VCN Volunteer Tracker (vt): A simple Access2000 database is currently being used to document volunteer inquiries and placements in the Technical Volunteer Web project and VCN Volunteer Program. All inquiries are manually forwarded to the Request Tracker. The online Volunteer Application Form currently submits through email, and once a decision is made to interview, the data is manually entered into the Volunteer Contact Database. A volunteer tracking database is needed to help VCN's volunteer administration. We have decided to develop our own application instead of buying a commercial product, and a quick search for an open-source application showed nothing interesting.   The development of this project could be very important to other non-profits in that it uses a commonly used proprietary product as the design tool and face, while using an open source online application to produce information that can be accessed and distributed through the Internet.

The vt project team is using Access 2000 as both a design tool for the database and a front end to access the tables with the database tables hosted on VCN's mySQL database server. A CGI program is being developed so that the Online Volunteer Application Form submits directly into the database. The CGI program would also help certain volunteers update their shift activities on the helpdesk. A recently uploaded webcalendar is being investigated to see how it might be integrated into the activities section of the database. The Access2000 portion of this project was started over a year ago by a volunteer who returned for this past summer. Over the summer, five volunteers worked on the project and designed their own team roles. Of those five, one remains active, with the rest having returned to school or work commitments. A volunteer 'project coordinator' is finalizing a full report on the process and results for use by other community groups.

Conclusion

Promotion of the Technical Volunteer Web and the volunteer opportunities led many applicants to believe that the sole mandate of the Vancouver Community Network was to provide them with hands-on training and work experience. Although this is a key objective of the Technical Volunteer Web project, the goal of developing a sustainable network of technical volunteers supporting each other and their non-profits was being subsumed to the detriment of the sustainability of the project and the VCN's resources.

Vancouver Community Network asks for a minimum three month commitment. Given the appeal of these positions as enhancing work experience, it is not surprising that many volunteers gain employment shortly after beginning their volunteer work. The other reasons most commonly given for leaving relate to school and work commitments. Two volunteers also started maternity leave in August.

High turnover rates are a fact of life in many volunteer programs, particularly as volunteerism is increasingly promoted as a way of developing work experience. For the

VCN and Technical Volunteer Web project, the challenge is in finding the appropriate balance between offering work experience and training, and finding volunteers who will be able to complete their assignments and stay long enough to receive sufficient training and then use it in another placement.

While the high turnover rate makes it extremely difficult to meet the objectives of physically deploying volunteers toward developing a sustainable network operating from a number of voluntary organizations, the evolution of our screening process seems to offer some hope, and the projects that are developing through shorter-term commitments are undoubtedly of significant value to the overall goals of the project in helping non-profits with their Internet use and technical volunteer programs.