



**Submission in response to the Department of
Communications, Information Technology and
the Arts discussion papers:**

- *The role of ICT in building communities and social capital; and*
- *Information and communications technology transforming the nonprofit sector*

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1. Executive summary

The role of ICT in building communities and social capital

Volunteering Australia agrees that:

- ICT 'makes positive contributions to the community and does not erode social connectedness and social capital'.
- Access to affordable broadband Internet should be considered a matter of critical, basic infrastructure.

Barriers to building social capital through ICT

Policy barriers

- At least one instance exists of government policy precluding social capital building through 'virtual' volunteering.

Social barriers

- Some nonprofit organisations resist introducing ICT systems because it is not part of the accepted way of doing things.

Information and communications technology transforming the nonprofit sector

- ICT usage is widespread, but concentrated in larger, more established and better resourced organisations.
- For some organisations the implementation of ICT has allowed them to benefit from relatively new forms of volunteering that are part of a broader trend in volunteering away from long term volunteer assignments.
 - Virtual volunteering
 - Corporate volunteering

Barriers to effective use of ICT

- The barriers to adoption and effective use of ICT are adequately identified in the discussion paper.
- Our experience in working with the nonprofit sector has shown that the results of these barriers are:
 - Organisations may not use ICT
 - Organisations may adopt inferior technology
 - Duplications in service provision exist
 - Organisations may use ICT to replicate manual systems
 - Information management may suffer

Role of government in supporting nonprofit organisations with ICT

- Funding should be offered at a level enabling nonprofits use of ICT to be more consistent with the private and government sectors.
- Recognising that changes in government reporting requirements may require systems changes for organisations and supporting them in this process.
- Contributing to the ICT education of the nonprofit sector.

2. About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body working to advance volunteering in the Australian community. Our mission is to represent the diverse views and needs of the volunteer sector while promoting the activity of volunteering as one of enduring social, cultural and economic value.

Volunteering Australia's network consists of the state and territory volunteering centres (our member organisations) and the network of regional volunteer resource centres (VRC's) located around Australia.

Our core business is to:

- Provide government and organisations involving volunteers sound policy advice on matters relating to volunteering;
- Provide a national focus for the promotion of volunteering and its principles;
- Establish cooperative relationships with key national and international stakeholder organisations to further volunteering in Australia;
- Encourage best practice in volunteer management;
- Develop, monitor and review national standards for the involvement of volunteers in all forms of not-for-profit organisations and initiatives;
- Advocate for the proper recognition and support of volunteer referring agencies;
- Develop, monitor and review national standards for the referral of volunteers;
- Closely consult with member organisations and other key stakeholders to further the mission of Volunteering Australia;
- Provide opportunities for volunteer involvement through such initiatives as the Voluntary Work Initiative and GoVolunteer;
- Undertake, at a national level, any action believed to be in the best interest of volunteering in Australia;
- Produce a quality journal, which encourages discussion, debate and research on contemporary issues of importance to volunteering in Australia; and
- Conduct, promote or facilitate research on all aspects of volunteering in Australia.

Volunteering Australia and information and communications technology (ICT)

Volunteering Australia administers a range of ICT-based programs which facilitate and support volunteering. Chief among these are the GoVolunteer website and the National Volunteer Skills Centre (NVSC).

In addition to these programs, Volunteering Australia's own website contains a large amount of publications and information sheets for the volunteer sector – volunteer resource centres, organisations that involve volunteers and individual volunteers.

GoVolunteer

GoVolunteer is an initiative of Volunteering Australia in partnership with Seek Communications and the Boston Consulting Group. GoVolunteer is Australia's first web-based national matching service for nonprofit organisations and volunteers.

GoVolunteer makes matching volunteers with nonprofit organisations much faster and more efficient. It reduces the time and cost of recruiting volunteers and makes it easier for more Australians to make a difference in their local community.

More than 46,500 people searched for volunteer positions on www.govolunteer.com.au during January 2005.

In 2003 the partnership behind GoVolunteer won the Multi-State Medium Business Winner category in the Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in the Community Business Partnerships. In 2004 the partnership was a 2004 finalist in the Australian Financial Review Corporate Partnership Awards.

National Volunteer Skills Centre (NVSC)

The National Volunteer Skills Centre (NVSC) is a learning and skills development hub designed especially for the volunteer sector. It is a web-based project of Volunteering Australia, supported with funding from the Australian Government's Department of Family and Community Services.

The purpose of the NVSC is to:

- Build the knowledge and skills of volunteers and managers of volunteers across Australia to enhance the volunteer contribution to the Australian community;
- Build the sector's body of knowledge and not for profit organisations' capacity to involve volunteers effectively.

The NVSC achieves these aims through the provision of a range of training materials and other skills development resources. These resources are available free of charge, and have inbuilt flexibility so that they may be applied for a range of organisational and individual purposes. For example, volunteers can enhance their skills and/or expand the type of volunteering opportunities available to them by embarking on a self-education process to develop their skills at their own pace and in accordance with their own personal needs. Alternatively, volunteers can work towards a nationally recognized, accredited course by undertaking Certificate I, II or III in Active Volunteering, a course developed by the NVSC specifically for volunteers.

Managers of volunteers can access quality materials to improve their own skills and enhance the contribution of volunteers in a manner appropriate to their organisation.

The NVSC is also currently coordinating the networking of its own specialist volunteering library with a number of volunteering libraries nationwide.

3. The role of ICT in building communities and social capital

Volunteering Australia supports the central proposition raised in the discussion paper, that ICT 'makes positive contributions to the community and does not erode social connectedness and social capital'. This has been borne out in our experiences in running GoVolunteer and the NVSC.

Volunteering Australia endorses the view that access to affordable broadband Internet should be considered a matter of critical, basic infrastructure, and one that is essential to enabling smaller nonprofits to use ICT to its fullest potential.

Barriers to building social capital through ICT

Policy barriers

Through our experience in delivering the Australian Government's Voluntary Work Initiative (VWI) program, we have become aware of an instance where public policy impedes social capital building using ICT.

The VWI is a program that provides information, referral and support services to Centrelink income support recipients to assist them in becoming involved in volunteering. Additionally, the program enables their voluntary work to be recognised towards meeting activity test, Mutual Obligation, or other participation requirements.

For welfare recipients' volunteering to be recognised by Centrelink, the organisation within which they are volunteering must be 'approved' and the type of work must also comply with set guidelines. One of these guidelines stipulates that volunteers can not be working within their own home, for their own organisation, or with their own family. This guideline, preventing working in one's own home, effectively provides a barrier to people receiving Centrelink payments engaging in 'virtual volunteering', which is discussed in further detail in Section 4 of this submission.

In our experience this has had the effect of denying volunteering to people who are geographically isolated, disabled or have caring responsibilities in the home, and may therefore only be able to make their volunteering contribution through a 'virtual volunteering' opportunity, or may prefer to do so. For example, people working in a remote area may face limited volunteering opportunities in the same way as they may face limited labour-market opportunities, however the opportunity to volunteer 'virtually' may enable them to contribute skills to an urban-based organisation. Similarly, people with disabilities may prefer to volunteer from home due to physical, transport, or access

limitations, but also because some disabilities may require specialised support tools (which may include ICT tools such as speech-recognition software, or modified computer accessories) that they have at home, but that an organisation can not afford to provide on-site.

Social barriers

Some nonprofit organisations have resisted introducing ICT systems because it is not part of the accepted way of doing things. This is indicative of the unequal nature of technological ability in Australian society.

4. Information and communications technology transforming the nonprofit sector

Volunteering Australia's experience of information and communications technology (ICT) usage in volunteer organisations is in line with the assertion in the discussion paper *'Information and communications technology transforming the nonprofit sector'*, that ICT usage is widespread, but concentrated in larger, more established and better resourced organisations.

The uneven nature of resourcing across nonprofit organisations involving volunteers is a matter of fact for the volunteer sector. The discussion paper correctly identifies this as contributing to a varying ability among organisations to implement ICT systems and to use them to foster links with other organisations. For some organisations the implementation of ICT has allowed them to benefit from relatively new forms of volunteering.

Virtual volunteering and *corporate volunteering* are two relatively recent developments in volunteering that have had their genesis, at least in part, from the rise of ICT in organisations.

These types of volunteering are part of a broader trend in volunteering away from unskilled, long term volunteer assignments toward shorter (sometimes fixed) term volunteer assignments involving skilled work on a set task. This trend in volunteering has emerged alongside generational and technical change in Australian society. It is these trends that provide pointers to how ICT can be more effectively used by nonprofit organisations to build their internal capacity and that of the broader community.

Virtual volunteering is the term often used to describe volunteering that is performed at a location remote to the organisation. This is not an entirely new occurrence as remote volunteering has been possible for many years via telephone and postal systems¹. However, the rise of ICT opens up many new possibilities for virtual volunteering. For example, it may be possible for people to do volunteer work on their personal computers at home or at another workplace. It also makes volunteering accessible to volunteer who find it difficult to leave home – for example some disabled people or parents of young children.

This form of volunteering can provide challenges on an administrative level. The organisation must have the capacity in terms of ICT implementation, and the ability to manage volunteers working off-site as well as the contributions they make working toward organisational objectives.

¹ Murray, V. et al (2002) *Virtual Volunteering: Current Status and Future Prospects*, p2

Corporate Volunteering

Corporate volunteering is a positive development in the volunteering sector, and can allow nonprofits to access the more specialised skills and greater technical resources of the private sector.

Corporate volunteering refers to an organisation, usually a large corporation, allowing their employees to volunteer for a nonprofit organisation for a set amount of time per week or fortnight, or for a specified number of days per year. It may involve the employee applying the skills (for example web development skills) that they use in their paid role in the nonprofit organisation.

Like other aspects of technological adoption and access discussed in this submission, the nonprofits best placed to benefit from these schemes are the larger, better resourced and better known nonprofits.

Barriers to effective use of ICT

Some nonprofit organisations struggle to use ICT effectively. In a competitive world, this has implications both for the core business of the organisation, and its ability to attract volunteers and other resources.

The barriers to adoption and effective use of ICT are adequately identified in the discussion paper:

Research indicates a range of barriers to the full adoption and effective use of ICT within the sector, including accessibility, access to ICT and technical support, technological literacy, cost, the fast pace of technological change, availability of reliable advice and lack of overall strategic direction in some areas².

Our experience in working with the nonprofit sector has shown that this has the following results:

- *Organisations may not use ICT* at all, undermining their visibility and credibility.
- *Organisations may adopt inferior technology* in line with their limited technological awareness and financial resources. Examples include the widespread use of slow dial-up connections and the use of outmoded or database systems unsuitable for their purposes.
- *Duplications in service provision may exist* alongside a lack of portal sites. Indeed, government may fund duplication where

² Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (2005) *Information and communications technology transforming the nonprofit sector*, p 2

departments fund essentially the same service under different programs or projects.

Volunteering Australia is seeking to develop an ICT project 'Australian Volunteering Operating System' (OZVOS) to increase the capacity of the GoVolunteer website and provide a uniform, up to date database system for VRC's. OZVOS is to feature an inbuilt capacity for VRC's to run reports to meet their reporting requirements for government funding. OZVOS would also be available for purchase for other organisations, such as local councils, who wish to run large scale volunteer search engines with their own interface. This process promises to reduce duplication across services, provide best possible technology to under-resourced organisations, and provide a more comprehensive catalogue of volunteering opportunities.

- *Organisations may use ICT to replicate manual systems* without streamlining processes or building in efficiencies. That ICT is not used to its full potential indicates a lack of training investment in employees and volunteers. This also means that often small nonprofit organisations are not aware that there are better technological alternatives to the ones they are using.
- *Information management may suffer* as nonprofit employees and volunteers are not trained to deal with the volume of information that arrives via email, or that they may have access to via the internet.

Role of business and government in increasing effective ICT usage in nonprofit sector

Partnerships between nonprofit organisations and business are important opportunities for improving the ICT capacity of nonprofit organisations, as shown in our experience with GoVolunteer.

Government has a strong role to play in enhancing ICT usage in the nonprofit sector. In addition to current measures we would like to see the following occur:

- Recognition of the importance of funding infrastructure for nonprofit organisations so that they can use IT at a level more consistent with the private and government sectors.
- Recognising that changes in reporting requirements may require systems changes for organisations and supporting them in this process.
- An educative role for government in assisting the nonprofit sector with ICT.