**Accommodations for Online Volunteers who have Learning Disabilities or Emotional and Anxiety Disorders**

A person managing an online program, either a virtual volunteering program or one that provides online service delivery for an agency, needs to have a general understanding of various learning styles, working styles and information-processing styles. Volunteer management is not "one-size-fits-all," and simple adjustments in management style can be made to effectively channel talents and resources of the greatest number of people.

Volunteer managers working with online volunteers or looking to provide service delivery online should also be aware of seemingly "hidden" or "nonapparent" disabilities, such as learning disabilities (the most common form of disability), and emotional and anxiety disorders. Unlike other disabilities, such as paralysis, blindness, or even chronic illnesses, learning disabilities and emotional and anxiety disorders don't offer obvious visible signs to the casual observer, and can, therefore, seem "hidden" to someone working with online volunteers.

A learning disability (LD) is a disorder that affects a person's ability to either interpret what is seen or heard or to link information from different parts of the brain. These limitations can show up in many ways -- as specific difficulties with spoken and written language, coordination, self-control, or attention. They may impair multiple skills and abilities or they may impair only one. For example, difficulties with spelling may affect learners' writing skills, but not their reading skills. Learning disabilities include Dyslexia and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) . The National Institutes of Health estimates that 15-20% of the total population have a learning disability.

Emotional and anxiety disorders are also disabilities. These can include people that suffer from depression, frequent anxiety, panic attacks, phobias, obssessive-compulsive disorder and post traumatic stress disorder.

Don't confuse these disabilities with lack of intelligence or lack of talent! In fact, many people considered gifted or with very high I.Q.s also have learning disabilities or anxiety disorders. Some "gifted but LD" individuals include Albert Einstein, Agatha Christie, John F. Kennedy, Whoopi Goldberg, Nelson Rockefeller, Cher, George Patton, Leonardo da Vinci and Alexander Graham Bell. People with emotional and anxiety disorders include Abraham Lincoln, Edgar Allen Poe, Kim Basinger, Barbara Streisand.... and many, many others.

A volunteer manager does not have to become an expert in disabilities to involve people with disabilities as volunteers. Educating yourself about various disabilities in general, however, can help you learn to better accomodate a variety of volunteers in your program.

Neither the Virtual Volunteering Project staff nor its advisors are experts in disabilities, and the following information is only a stepping-stone to learn more about working with people who are disabled, or address various learning and working styles.

In compiling this information, we used resources from a variety of Web sites by scholars and practitioners who have studied or worked with people, particularly youth, with "nonapparent" disabilities, and worked with adults with different work and learning styles. We chose to concentrate in particular on these sites, as they provide suggestions that translate well into online volunteering programs:

* sites that offer advice for teachers working with youth with disabilities
* sites with resources for working with adult learners or employees with learning disabilities
* sites with resources for working with adults with various different learning and work styles, such as those for English as a Second Language (ESL) tutors
* sites that offer advice on working with students, adult learners and employees with emotional disabilities.

**Suggestions for Working With Volunteers With "Nonapparent" Disabilities**

Most of these suggestions are fundamental to the successful management of any volunteer. They can also help a volunteer manager accommodate a variety of work styles:

* Recognize that working with technology is stressful  
  For most people, computers and the Internet are very new ways to access and manage information. Virtual volunteering is only a few years old, and the vast majority of people you are working with will have no experience with providing service online. Keeping things simple and user-friendly will prevent many frustrations and keep volunteers feeling good about their involvement with your organization.
* Describe what volunteer assignments are like at your agency, and what online volunteering at your agency will be like.  
  Are most directions to online volunteers communicated via email? How many emails, on average, will a volunteer receive a week as part of this program? Is there a lot of reading and preparation involved to volunteer at your agency? Answer these questions on your Web site and in other materials that describe virtual volunteering at your agency; make sure this is information a volunteer sees before he or she completes your online application.
* Recognize the abilities, goals and work styles of each volunteer, and make assignments that are appropriate to those abilities, goals and work styles.  
  Let volunteers make this evaluation themselves, via your online application or a skills assessment survey. Ask potential volunteers:
  + what kinds of assignments do you want to do?
  + what areas do you feel you are an expert in, and what areas would you like more experience in?
  + do you like having assignments chosen for you, or do you like to choose an assignment for yourself from what's available?
  + do you like working on assignments in one-sitting over a few hours, or in tiny pieces over several days?

This pre-screening sets the tone for what volunteering with your organization will be like, for both you and the volunteer. It also helps match volunteers appropriately with assignments, and, in some cases, will help you (as volunteer manager) and a potential volunteer to determine if volunteering at your agency is appropriate for him or her.

* Break down volunteer assignments into the smallest task "pieces" possible.  
  This allows the volunteer to focus on just one component at a time, and avoid feeling overwhelmed. At the Virtual Volunteering Project, we have many assignments broken down into less complex units that can be completed in less than five hours each. It may be possible for your agency to create even shorter assignments; your agency can even break its online orientation process down to small pieces that can be completed in less-than-one-hour each, and use this as the initial assignments for all new volunteers. After initial short assignments, many volunteers feel comfortable taking on larger tasks that will take several hours to complete. Give volunteers repeated opportunities to let you know what kinds of assignments they want to undertake.
* Provide volunteers with models of what he or she should be doing, or what an assignment should look like at its completion.
* Have many different types and levels of assignments available.  
  Some assignments, like online research, require a great deal of reading. Other assignments, such as creating a .cgi file for an automated form, don't require any reading at all, but do require excellent attention to detail. Some assignments may have a very tight deadline of a few days, while others could be done at a volunteer's own pace over the course of a few weeks. Have a variety of these types of assignments available, and describe them in terms of the skills and time needed when offering them to volunteers. Then let volunteers self-select the assignments most appropriate for them.
* Simplify language as much as possible, and reinforce directions through rephrasing rather than through verbatim repetition.  
  It is sometimes easy to misinterpret written communications. Be prepared for this, and adjust written directions accordingly.
* Some volunteers may need both verbal and visual directions.  
  Would directions by phone be easier to communicate than directions via email? When possible, use online methods other than just email to explain tasks, such as charts, photos, graphics, and cartoons. If the volunteer is geographically nearby and has transportation available, you may want to set up a face-to-face meeting.
* Many volunteers need (and even expect) immediate answers and feedback regarding assignments.  
  Make a committment to answer all emails within 48 hours (two business days) of receipt, and let volunteers know when you have received an assignment. Without quick response from you, volunteers may feel frustrated, isolated and unsupported.
* Focus on outcomes rather than techniques, whenever possible.  
  This allows volunteers to approach the tasks the ways in which they feel most comfortable.
* People with attention or behavior problems do best in a structured environment, one where expectations and rules are clearly communicated to them, and where tasks are carefully designed for manageability and clarity.   
  Make sure expectations are clearly communicated from the onset -- in fact, include them in your recruitment materials. This helps volunteers self-select the opportunities most appropriate for their abilities.
* Challenging volunteers is great -- but also allow for mistakes and road blocks.  
  Your deadlines are important, and that's fine to emphasize that there's nothing virtual about your agencies needs regarding assignments, but not every assignment is right for every volunteer. Allow for volunteers to gracefully withdraw from assignments and move on to new ones, as appropriate and as needed.
* Realize that some volunteers will see you a just a facilitator and will need little guidance or support; others will need more supervision, instruction and contact.  
  By being able to adjust your management style to different volunteers, you will not only empower more volunteers to succeed and be able to benefit from the talents of the greatest number of people possible, but you will also become a better human resources manager!

**Related Resources**

* Ask Eric  
  The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), a federally-funded national information system that provides, through its 16 subject-specific clearinghouses, associated adjunct clearinghouses, and support components, a variety of services and products on a broad range of education-related issues. Searching the ERIC database and the Eric Digests provided a wealth of information.
* Siggy's Place - Index of Resources  
  Compiled by special education instructor Nancy Rogers from her years as a teacher and from research while she pursued her masters degree. A comprehensive index that led us to many of the resources we list on this page.
* [ABCs of Learning Disabilities and ADD](http://www.ldonline.org/abcs_info/articles-info.html)  
  Has numerous message boards with subjects like teaching students with LD and ASK THE EXPERT, to communiate directly with experts in the learning disability field.
* Learning Disabilities and ADD/ADHD  
  This site, sponsored by Westmark School for Students with Learning Differences and ADD/ADHD in Encino California, is an index of links to resources offering varying degrees of help to educators.

**Special Thanks**

To other Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation grantees, Dr. Sarah Jane Rehnborg of the Charles A. Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and Meg Young of Oregon Literacy, Inc. (OLI) for their wonderful suggestions and contributions to this material.