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Web Sites That Match Your Skills With Their Needs

By WINNIE HU

It was the quick, painless sign-up that drew Chris De Maria to volunteer work once again after more than a decade. He did not have to look up any phone numbers, fill out volumes of paperwork or be interviewed about what he wanted to do.

Mr. De Maria, 39, a marketing executive in New York City, simply tapped into an online volunteer database created by the Taproot Foundation, a nonprofit group that recruits business professionals for service projects (taprootfoundation.org). In a matter of minutes, he sent his contact information and a copy of his résumé. A return e-mail message invited him to an orientation meeting.

"They made it so easy to get involved," said Mr. De Maria, who has persuaded several of his friends to sign up, too. "Everyone has their day jobs, so this is a very effective way to communicate with people without becoming intrusive."

Charities and local governments from New York City to Fort Collins, Colo., are using 21st-century tools to sustain a tradition of volunteering. Many now list their activities on interactive Web sites and databases, update the information daily and send out regular e-mail messages to stay in touch with a growing cadre of volunteers.

Later this month, the Mayor's Volunteer Center in New York and the United Way of New York City will officially roll out an online database that lists more than 1,000 positions with 300 nonprofit groups. The database has already been used to recruit help for special events, like planting daffodils at Governors Island last month. Volunteers can find the database on a city Web site (www.nyc.gov/volunteer) and narrow the listings by entering specific criteria like borough, days available, skills and areas of interest.

Nazli Parvizi, executive director of the volunteer center, said the database would ease the process for prospective volunteers. "We've tried to set it up so that whatever you're searching for, you'll hopefully find something," Ms. Parvizi said.

Communities are using technology to supplement, and in some cases replace, traditional recruiting methods like advertising and neighborhood fliers. Nationwide, the number of volunteers grew last year to 63.8 million, or about 29 percent of the population, from 59.8 million in 2002, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The Poudre School District in Fort Collins received a \$34,000 grant from Hewlett-Packard in 2002 to create an online database to recruit more volunteers to tutor and mentor its 23,000 students. The district's Web site (www.psd.k12.co.us) has registered more than 5,500 volunteers, or about one-third more than two years ago.

Volunteer Florida, a state commission on volunteerism, put up an online database after Hurricane Charley (www.disasterhelp.net/vflorida) that drew more than 2,500 people for the recovery efforts in the first week alone. In Port Charlotte, a hard-hit area, people without computer access logged in on laptops in a mobile command vehicle parked outside the public library.

Wendy Spencer, chief executive of Volunteer Florida, said the volunteers were mobilized based on personal information that they entered into the database, like where they lived and what skills they had. For example, when the city of Wauchula needed 100 volunteers to remove debris and survey damaged neighborhoods, the commission quickly dispatched residents nearby for the effort.

While many charities have created their own databases from scratch, others are paying a nominal fee to use systems developed by national organizations.

The Points of Light Foundation, which was started by former President George Bush, introduced an online database in June after spending more than \$2 million to research and create it. The database is being used by 95 volunteer centers nationwide, each paying \$700 to \$2,500. "It is a way to reach people who would not otherwise be available or interested," said Robert K. Goodwin, the foundation's president.

Similarly, the United Way of America has made its online database available to 83 volunteer centers, including the one in New York City. The system, which was designed by students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1997, can be leased for \$3,000 to \$5,000 annually.

Local governments, schools districts and even businesses are also using the online databases to encourage volunteering among their employees and community members. Samaritan Technologies, a company based in Salt Lake City, has helped set up 94 online databases nationwide, including ones for Volunteer Florida and the Poudre School District, for \$1,100 to \$2,200 annually.

For those without their own databases, there are a number of Web sites that post the information online for them at little or no cost. For instance, VolunteerMatch lists more than 32,000 opportunities in practically every ZIP code on its Web site (www.volunteermatch.org). Last year, the site recorded 1.5 million visitors.

The Mayor's Volunteer Corps in Los Angeles often advertises its service projects on VolunteerMatch. Jorge Quezada, the volunteer manager of the corps, hopes to create his own searchable database but says he lacks the resources.

In other communities, though, technology has already transformed the nature of volunteering. The Volunteer Resource Center for the Minneapolis and St. Paul region, which dates back to 1919, once kept records of volunteer work on library cards. That information is now stored on an online database (www.volunteertwincities.org).

"I wonder if we would be around anymore without it," said Diane Brady, executive director of the center. "Because the shift has been dramatic."

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