Organization Story

Online Volunteers Make a Difference at UNITeS

February 07, 2003

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The **United Nations Information Technology Service** (UNITeS) is focused on bridging the "digital divide" in the developing world through volunteerism, and that includes online volunteers!

The UNITeS initiative was announced by the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, in his Millennium Report "We the Peoples: the Role of the United Nations in the Twenty-First Century" (April 2000). Onsite volunteers under the UNITeS initiative work directly with people and institutions (in developing countries) to build their capacity on the applications of information and communications technologies (ICT) to human development.

Human development is the set of processes which leads to greater choice by people, and, implicitly, to a better quality of life. Building capacity is a more comprehensive concept than training: it is about strengthening the abilities of people or institutions to manage what they do (or need to be doing). For instance, teaching accountants about database programs and spreadsheets is one thing -- training; working with the staff at nonprofit organizations or government organizations to introduce database programs or spreadsheets into their program management and accounting work requires much more time and transferring more knowledge in both formal and informal learning environments.

The UN Volunteers program manages the NetAid Online Volunteering service, and as UNITeS is a part of UNV, we made it a priority to incorporate online volunteers into our initiative in some way. We decided that our initial OV activities would focus on online volunteers supporting onsite volunteers in developing countries, through the compiling of various knowledge relating to ICTs for Development (ICT4D).

We began posting assignments to NetAid in February 2002. Now, just a year later, more than 60 online volunteers have supported onsite volunteers involved with UNITeS in both direct and indirect ways.

Online volunteers recruited through NetAid support onsite volunteers affiliated with UNITeS by:

- exchanging ideas and resources on the UNITeSCommunity, an online community for all of our volunteers, online and onsite
- researching and documenting resources for the UNITeS Knowledge Base, an online resource designed to support all volunteers working in or for developing countries and using ICT in some significant way as part of their service
- providing UNITeS staff with information and opinions in a particular area of expertise relating to ICTs and the developing world, to be synthesized and summarized by staff for onsite volunteers

Some volunteers spend weeks individually-researching topics on the Internet, such as finding online safety guidelines in French, and then preparing this information for publishing in the UNITeS Knowledge Base. Some volunteers are in online "think and talk" groups, reading and responding to occasional emails from other online volunteers on a particular topic: for example, through NetAid, UNITeS recruited online volunteers with strong interests in how wireless technologies could be adapted in the developing world, and these volunteers now post resources, ask questions of each other and engage in debates about wireless applications, all via email.

The questions and debates make up one of my favorite parts of working with online volunteers; in seeing that there isn't agreement on, say, whether or not it is inappropriate to share a broadband connection, or to share a particular software, helps these volunteers to understand how issues and challenges may be thought of very differently in a country or culture different from their own. It gives these volunteers a taste of how complicated it can be to work in development, and I hope it gives them an understanding of why so many problems for some of the world's poorest people aren't so easily addressed, despite how simple it might look from the TV news. These questions and debates also keep me on my toes, both as a

volunteer manager and as a development professional: they frequently expose me to issues I haven't thought of, or that I need to explore more fully.

Via NetAid, we have found Arabic speakers with interests in Internet resources for volunteers, experts in open source and Linux, and former onsite volunteers, including UN Volunteers, who used ICTs as part of their service in developing countries and now want to provide assistance online. It seems that no matter how specific we've gotten in an online volunteering post, we've been able to find an online volunteer to fill that assignment. We are particular pleased that half of our online volunteers are women, and that at least 40% are from developing countries.!

The hardest part about managing online volunteers, for me, is managing email. What works for me currently is to have separate folders in my email program and to go through my email inbox at least once a month and to make sure every email from or to volunteers is in the right folder. One folder is for emails that detail completed assignments and feedback, one for emails regarding volunteers I haven't "accepted" yet, one for volunteers needing a response, and one for just general correspondance. I also have folders for specific assignments that groups of volunteers are working on, like one called "Wireless" and another called "Open Source."

Online volunteers are vital to the efforts of UNITeS; they are not only talented and experienced, but they also bring a unique energy and very different point of view than staff or consultants. They help us reach a diversity of cultures, ideas and practices as well. We need the unique traits of these online volunteers to help UNITeS meet its mission.