

Virtual Volunteering in Community Sport

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As community sport clubs begin their return to play phases, the short and long-term impacts of COVID-19 – on the field and in the office – are unmistakable. Physical distancing measures and stay-at-home protocols have illuminated how technology can keep people connected and involved in their local communities. These new ways of working provide an opportunity for community sport clubs to tap into existing and new volunteers in innovative ways. This article will discuss the concept of virtual volunteering and its benefits. Suggestions are provided below for incorporating virtual volunteer-

ing into community sport now and as an ongoing practice to increase capacity and engagement.

What is Virtual Volunteering?

Virtual volunteering simply refers to volunteer tasks “...done online, via computers, tablets or smartphones, usually off-site from the non-profit organization being supported” (Volunteer Canada, 2019). This form of volunteering is also known as online volunteering, digital volunteering, and e-service. Virtual volunteering is by no means a new concept, and has been around since the start of the internet itself (Cravens & Ellis, 2014). In many cases, on-site and virtual volunteers are the same people, but virtual volunteering can also be used as a strategy to engage people who would otherwise be unlikely or unable to volunteer.

The sport sector is a vibrant context for volunteering in Canada, accounting for almost one quarter of all volunteers (Volunteer Canada, 2015). While many volunteer positions within the sector are considered “on-site” roles such as coaches, officials, and event hosts, sport clubs also rely on volunteers for administration and management support behind the scenes. During the global pandemic, clubs are being required to re-imagine how sport is delivered and how to best support athletes during this time. Many clubs are struggling with new or increased demands requiring technical, administrative, communication and advocacy expertise. Given the uncertainty remaining for the various phases of return-to-sport plans in many sports, it may be helpful to consider how existing and new volunteers can contribute to addressing immediate club needs, and support long-term engagement.

The Benefits of Virtual Volunteering

In a time when so much in our life has changed and feels uncertain, contributing to your community from your home and helping others is important for mental health and overall wellbeing (Lu et.al, 2019). Times of crises can strengthen people’s pro-social behaviours such as volunteering. Some volunteer agencies

such as Volunteer British Columbia have noticed an increase in the number of people wanting to volunteer during the pandemic, which the organization attributes to an increase in people's amount of free time (Zillich, 2020). In particular, volunteering in community sport can build a sense of community and connection between like-minded individuals (Dickson, Hallman & Phelps, 2017). Typical forms of sport volunteering can generate the perception that volunteer involvement requires face-to-face interaction and set schedules. However, virtual contributions to community sport organizations can benefit volunteers by allowing for more schedule flexibility and completion of tasks from home.

Virtual volunteering also reduces some barriers to volunteer involvement such as geographic location, physical ability constraints, or inflexible work hours (Volunteer Canada, 2019). For example, 64% of Canadians ages 75 and older expressed that physical ability impaired their ability to participate in traditional volunteering activities (Volunteer Canada, 2015). Virtual volunteering can be an inclusive way to engage busy professionals, older adults with experience in sport clubs, or others with varying physical abilities in the sport community, and foster connections to sport. In return, virtual volunteers can enhance the capacity and resources of the club through contributing their skills and time in a variety of different roles.

Pivoting to Virtual Volunteering

For sport organizations seeking ways to adapt to new circumstances, virtual volunteering could provide a means to gain much needed assistance in advancing club operations. Like other volunteer strategies, success depends on having a clear purpose and strong support for the program (Bezmalinovic Dhebar & Stokes, 2008). Sport organizations should start by conducting a needs analysis to determine where help is required and where virtual volunteer investments could best be focused. Remember that these individuals are part of your overall volunteer team and volunteer management policies and procedures should be applied consistently with-



out distinguishing between virtual and on-site volunteers. Established practices should be applied relating to screening, interviewing, training, and orientation (see Cravens & Ellis, 2014).

Virtual volunteers can be identified through a call to current volunteers and broader membership outlining the opportunities, or by posting virtual volunteer opportunities through your local volunteer agency or on other sites like charityvillage.com and SIRC.ca. In these posts, be clear about the time commitment and any specific skills and technology required for virtual volunteers. As with all volunteers, organizational support is crucial and has benefits for both the volunteer (e.g. decreased stress, increased commitment) and the organization (e.g. reduced turnover, enhanced productivity levels) (Eisenbeger et al., 2011). In order to ensure volunteers feel supported, volunteer orientation is key. Orienting volunteers to the organization, its policies, platforms and training them on any specifics related to their position will help volunteers feel comfortable and competent from the get go. Be transparent as to whether or not it is feasible or not for your organization to provide financial compensation for software or subscriptions to secure virtual platforms that they need to complete certain project or tasks prior to the volunteer agreeing to take on the role. In addition, it may be helpful to decide on and communicate a record system to ensure organization has a consolidated place to store related documents to help virtual volunteers and your organization stay organized.

Ways to Engage Virtual Volunteers

Volunteers can contribute virtually in a variety of roles while social distancing measures are still in place and may continue within these roles as restrictions ease. Such roles could include social media specialist, digital marketing coordinator, administrative assistant, scheduler, video analyst, web designer, community outreach coordinator, online mentor, inclusion education. Volunteer roles assigned in the short-term may help to minimize organizational costs; however virtual volunteering programs designed from a perspective of strategic growth can help achieve program scale (Bezmalinovic Dhebar & Stokes, 2008). As pandemic restrictions continue to lift, consider the potential for virtual volunteering roles to contribute to ongoing minimization or recuperation of funds, as well as opportunities for virtual volunteers to increase capacity and augment organizational growth.

The list below offers 12 ways to engage virtual volunteers in your sport organizations during physical distancing:

1. Implementing return to sport plans

Create a return to sport committee to help customize and implement plans and policies that respect guidance from public health departments and sport governing bodies. Volunteers can help to refine contingency plans for training and competition to their specific local context, while ensuring all plans support a safe and quality experience for members. Volunteers can monitor the communications from relevant sport governing bodies for direction in this process to ensure the club is complying with guidelines and decision making.

2. Tap into new funding streams

Engage a volunteer with expertise in fundraising, sponsorship and/or grant writing to apply for relevant COVID-19 government subsidies, seek new funding opportunities, or develop a strategy to diversify the organization's funding.

3. Coordinate communications for all return to play related inquiries

While much of the future of sport remains unknown, club members need to feel supported with clear communication related to the future of their sport club and its programs. Designate a group of volunteers to create a webpage and contact line for any return to sport related inquiries to ensure answers are consistent and members feel heard.

4. Support athlete training and skill development

Support current or new coaches in hosting online strength and conditioning or sport skill development sessions for their athletes. Volunteers could facilitate opportunities for coaches to share ideas, curate credible resources, create weekly fitness challenges to support activities, or coordinate an online session with a certified professional for multiple teams.

5. Deliver educational content for members

Tap into expertise amongst your membership or the broader community to deliver educational seminars for your athletes, parents, coaches and others. Topics could include mental health, conflict resolution, bullying prevention, concussion awareness, nutrition or inclusion (consider what is most relevant to your members or club objectives!), with volunteers delivering content based on expertise, and coordinating the sessions. Alternatively, recruit volunteers to identify credible content to share with members, such as TED Talks.



6. Expand the credentials of your volunteers by encouraging participation in an online certification program

Encourage volunteers to engage in online education or certification programs specific to their role. For example, encourage coaches to complete the NCCP Multi-Sport Training or the Coaching Association of Canada's new Safe Sport Training. Other national sport organizations also provide a range of training and professional development opportunities that can be explored and shared among volunteers such as the Keeping Girls in Sport module and Sport for Life course offerings.

7. Update the club website

A volunteer with website development experience can assess the functionality, accessibility and content of the sport organization's website and make improvements. The website should be made accessible for persons with disabilities, and new features can be added such as closed-captioned videos. The site should accurately share the latest news on return to sport plans.

8. Build a social media campaign to reinforce club values or follow a specific initiative

Social media campaigns can be developed by volunteers for present or future use to enhance the club's communication efforts related to specific initiatives or values. Other campaigns could recognize the efforts of current volunteers and promote opportunities for others to get involved. To learn more about how to enhance your organization's reputation via communications check out Building a pandemic communications strategy must start with this one-word question.

9. Develop an athlete mentorship program

Senior athletes can volunteer as mentors for younger athletes and check in regularly to help them with goal setting, motivation for training at home, and overall wellbeing. Experienced athletes can be introduced to volunteering in sport in new ways and fuel their interest in coaching and other youth development pursuits.

10. Develop a regular social calendar for your sport club

Assign volunteers to a social committee to create opportunities for members and other volunteers to connect socially, even if they're not yet on the field or in the pool. Online socials could include activities such as sport trivia nights, bingo, fun skill or activity challenges, cooking bake offs, and more!

11. Engage in the concept of micro- volunteering

Micro-volunteering is another fantastic option to keep volunteers engaged, but not overwhelm them. Some people may be more likely to volunteer their time in short and convenient, bite-sized chunks (i.e. 30 minutes or less). Micro-volunteering offers volunteers a series of easy tasks that can be done anytime, from their own homes, on their own terms. The concept isn't new; it has historically been done mostly in the UK. Sport related micro-volunteering examples could include micro-consulting initiatives in the form of posing a question or generating a poll for your social media audience to garner feedback, creative input and ideas on things like club logo, creative artwork or marketing ideas.

12. Partner with other causes and organizations to give back to the community

COVID-19 has impacted many of society's most vulnerable communities. Volunteers could reach out to local non-profit organizations outside of sport that might need support at this time and coordinate efforts to help among the club membership. Some clubs, such as the TriMuskoka Triathlon, have already contributed to hospitals and foodbanks to provide volunteer support and resources during this time of need. Research has shown that members are paying attention to and support their club's efforts to engage in socially responsible initiatives (Misener, Morrison, Shier, & Babiak, 2020). Club members care deeply about the wider community and clubs who engage in social action may benefit through member loyalty and positive word of mouth.

Retaining Virtual Volunteers Post-Pandemic

As public health measures are relaxed and sport clubs begin to offer on-site programming again, virtual volunteers can continue to represent an important lifeblood of a club's operations. Many of the roles listed above will remain relevant and can evolve into ongoing volunteer roles. Thinking of volunteers beyond the arena or board room can help clubs remain resilient in times of change, but also promote diversity and innovation within the volunteer force.

After orientation, be sure to consistently check in on virtual volunteers. Research shows that after 6 months of taking on a role, perception of organizational support changes and volunteers slowly can feel less appreciated if the organization becomes less attentive to the needs and concerns of volunteers (Eisenberger et. al, 2011). Aim for the latter by recognizing your virtual volunteers and creating opportunities for meaningful contributions and connections.

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