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Managing Volunteers in Tech in non-profit entities

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Managing Volunteers in Tech in non-profit entities

Volunteering matters. When we support people, we feel rewarded for our role in society and the actual impact we can have by investing our time and resources for a cause. The present work has been developed within the frame of the project “Raise Volunteers in Tech” financed by the European Commission under contract 2016-1-LU02-KA205-000232 and it aims to give information, inquire and reach some provisional working conclusions with regards to the actual state of volunteering and its relation to digital technologies.

Young people are regular users of technology but current research ([ECDL Foundation, 2014](#); [Telecentre Europe, 2015](#)) shows that often they do not have the relevant skills to be competent users. Furthermore, as youth unemployment is a major issue all over Europe, mastering these skills is becoming critical to filling the huge gap created by the digital revolution ([EC, 2017](#)).

Over the last couple of years many new initiatives in the field of non-formal and informal education, especially in the youth field, have arisen, with non-profit and non-governmental organisations playing a central role in being pioneers. Often these organisations have started up with limited resources relying on a group of highly motivated individuals acting on a voluntary basis. Grassroots initiatives such as RailsGirls, Coding Dojo, Code Club, Raspberry Pi Jam, Hackerspaces and various computer clubs and coding workshops are spreading around, but they are not systematised and there is no clear overview of them. The European Union has launched the Code Week which is regularly held each fall, but it doesn't seem to be enough, due to the overall lack of systematisation, as well as the lack of coordination between countries.

Nevertheless, it is important to notice that volunteering has often been underexploited or poorly managed, particularly when it comes to current ICT activities or the concrete organisation of events or informal courses. In particular, the following ones are the main weaknesses to be detected: a) lack of definition of the role and tasks of volunteers in digital education; b) under-exploitation of coaching and mentoring in awareness raising activities in ICT; c) short-ended effects on the creation and delivery of training, communication processes and digital events organisation (Code Week/informal meetups/on-off workshops) and therefore lack of long-term sustainability for these goodwill initiatives.

Therefore, Raivotech has gathered data with regards to volunteers in the digital field, as well as conducted rigorous empirical confrontation among different countries, detecting common issues and patterns. What is more, it created material to support all the organisations that do not have enough expertise in coordinating and empowering volunteers, providing them with guidelines for volunteers in digital organisations.

Relevance

The importance of the Raivotech project lies in understanding the conditions and needs of volunteers involved in digital education and action, a specific group of volunteers that still fails to be completely recognised. What is more, Raivotech aims to depict the

difference between digital volunteers, volunteers in tech fields, as well as ICT corporate volunteers.

Such a variety has not really been thoroughly discussed in different European documents, leaving a fundamental discussion aside. Digital skills and actions are covered without deepening the topic into the framework of volunteering. Therefore, the present work aims to fill that gap, in particular defining the needs and the roles of different volunteers.

Research themes and objectives

The Raivotech project focuses on the management and empowerment of youth organisations involving volunteers in technology. The strategic importance of volunteerism is limited to practical terms of organisation management of young volunteers in technology – this means corporate and digital volunteers, as well as volunteers in technology.

The main objectives of the research were to:

- Discuss the conditions and the needs of volunteers in ICT;
- Analyse why volunteers do not approach ICT-related organisations;
- Define the core of the problems of organisations working in ICT, with reference to a wide spectrum of issues;
- Define with more precision the main issues affecting volunteer management and all its aspects.

In this sense, the work has investigated the different reasons which lead (mainly) young people to volunteer and their expectations in terms of social activism regardless whether or not related to ICT.

Analytical framework and methodology

Understanding exclusion as the intertwining between social and ICT factors makes it possible as well to grasp why the European Union has intended Digital Agenda as a propelling tool to reach relevant social objectives through digital gap filling. The discussion about volunteering in ICT is relevant in terms of social impact, combining the action on major social issues with digital gap filling.

The following scheme of interpretation has led the work referred to Raise Volunteers in Tech, depicting the theoretical picture around the role of volunteering.

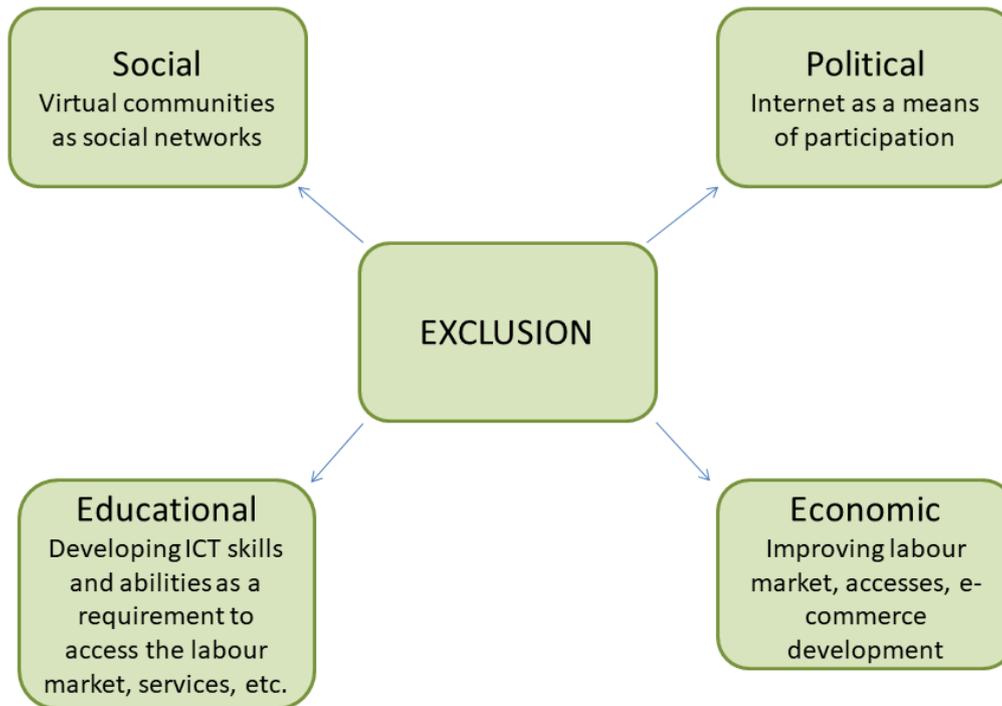


Figure 1: Social exclusion: dimensions and possible ICT contributions (adapted from Van Windem, 2003)

Basically, to paint a full picture of volunteering means to investigate its complexity in terms of consequences and requirements and related techno-societal issues. Therefore, exclusion in our discussion should be understood in a broad sense as dis-empowerment. As such, people can be more or less empowered according to their relative access to the different basis of “digital social power”, meaning the possibility to get access to a number of services and actually being able to use them (e.g. exploitation of social media connections for networking purposes etc.). The perception of access to the bases of digital social power is always subjective and individual, in relation to the individual’s needs, capabilities and actual knowledge in terms of digital skills.

Starting from this analytical framework, Raivotech partners have developed a questionnaire (annex 1) which tries to recap the main elements in terms of volunteering in technology-related themes. The questionnaire has been spread among four different countries, involving several nationalities.

The questions have been limited to the functional topics that could have interested the scope of the project. The involvement of interviewees in answering to questions was based on their contribution to non-profit organisations as volunteers in digital education. Therefore, the spread of the questionnaire was only based on direct contacts of the organisations and on the immediate network of Raivotech partners.

Snowballing was used in order to spread the word within the target group and involve volunteers who were into digital education and digital-related practices (transfer of practical knowledge in specific digital activities, such as gaming, video-making etc.).

Scope of the work

The Raise Volunteers in Tech (Raivotech) project focuses on the role of young volunteers in technology-related organisations, trying to set the work in terms of more general non-profit volunteers management, giving guidance and providing concrete material for youth organisations.

The chosen target relates to the fact that volunteer recruitment and induction are often mismatched with regards to the needs of an organisation or, alternatively, they are not related to the local problems. Therefore, digital volunteering action fails to meet its objectives both in terms of matching expectations and in terms of concrete action in society. The situation is further complicated with specific reference to technology-related organisations where volunteers almost always face matching problems.

However, in order to show a broader picture, the Raivotech project has not only focused on digital volunteers, but it has also tried to draw valuable lessons in terms of more general volunteering, providing guidelines for youth associations not directly involved with volunteers in digital technology as well.

Disposition of the research

The first chapter introduces the reader to the general framework of volunteering in Europe, collecting the main documents and steps that have led to the actual definition of volunteering, as well as introducing the novelties brought with Erasmus plus and the European Solidarity Corps. It debates the relationship between volunteering and digital, defining different elements, categories and the necessary transformations. In particular, it will focus on the relationship between social and technological exclusion, interpreting ICT volunteering as an absolute novelty as a reaction to the huge communication and technological transformations which happened in last 20 years. It will depict the difference between volunteers operating in ICT awareness and digital volunteers, providing suggestions and further patterns.

The second chapter is focused on the research conducted by the Raise Volunteers in Tech (Raivotech) partnership in order to understand the status of volunteers and voluntary organisations, resuming the main frailties in Luxembourg, Italy, Greece and Cyprus.

The third chapter is about interpreting data and releasing valuable insights gained from the research and the chosen analytical framework.

Volunteering in Europe

Volunteering does not have an agreed upon definition among the European Member States. With regards to this lack of a shared definition, in the European practice a definition

was crafted in occasion of the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship (2011).

The definition of the European Council 2009/2010 of preamble section 5 is structured as follows:

“Having due regard to the particularities of the situation in each Member State and all forms of volunteering, the term "voluntary activities" refers to all types of voluntary activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal which are undertaken of a person's own free will, choice and motivation, and is without concern for financial gain. They benefit the individual volunteer, communities and society as a whole. They are also a vehicle for individuals and associations to address human, social, intergenerational or environmental needs and concerns, and are often carried out in support of a non-profit organisation or community-based initiative. Voluntary activities do not replace professional, paid employment opportunities but add value to society.”

The division among formal, non-formal or informal volunteering is quite critical with regards to the nuances that one is willing to assign to volunteering activities. Non-formal and informal are used much as synonyms and it refers to non-organised volunteering, while formal volunteerism is regarded as being part of the activities of well-structured organisations, where roles and duty limits are precisely assigned.

Regardless of the concrete finalisation of volunteer activities, volunteering has been considered since last years as a fundamental activity within the European Union. In 2008 the European Parliament adopted a report on the “Role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion”, aimed at encouraging Member States/regional/local authorities to support volunteering.

However, the main point was the lack of data with regards to volunteerism, also with reference to the absence of a clear way of how to measure the social and economic impact of volunteering (Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee). In this way, the EESC called for a Year of Volunteering which concreted in 2011 where the last special survey about volunteering at a European level was held.

Year 2011 was crucial to understand the effects and the magnitude of volunteering in all European countries, but after that year, studies on volunteering have been dwindling. In fact, many of the studies available at this moment are still referring to the findings of 2011. According to the surveys conducted by [Eurobarometer \(2011\)](#), 6462 of the 26 825 Europeans aged over 15 who were interviewed in 2011 expressed regular or occasional voluntary work for a total of 24% of the interviewed totality of people. This is in accordance with the estimations done by European Commission in 2007, claiming 100 million people in Europe involved in volunteer work. Of these respondents, 11% carry out this activity on a regular basis and 13% occasionally.

One of the aims of the [European Year of Volunteering](#) was to celebrate the work of millions of Europeans who devote part of their free time to a voluntary activity. However, when it comes to the specific liaison between volunteering and youth, it is fundamental to mention the [White Paper of 2001](#) which recognised voluntary activities as a key element for youth empowerment and professional growth. In particular, it put the basis for the further development of EU/national/regional of the voluntary service (it is important to recall that European Voluntary Service was born in a basic form in 1986). In 2002 volunteering was recognised by the Member States as a crucial part of youth policies through the creation of

[Open Method of Coordination](#) (OMC) for Youth which led to the adoption of a resolution on 29 October 2004 by the Council of Youth Ministers. In 2005, the [European Pact for Youth and promoting active citizenship](#) was launched by the European Council and it has relevant guidelines to foster volunteering as a fundamental activity in the European Union. In particular, it was one of the tools to enhance also the basis of European Voluntary Service. This Resolution urged the Commission to develop, promote and facilitate access to the European Youth Portal, EURES, PLOTEUS and EURODESK in order to help young people take advantage of the opportunities to work, volunteer and study abroad, concealing their working, family, leisure and social life.

There were two very important moments for volunteering in Europe, namely: 2007, when Erasmus plus came into force, and the introduction of European Solidarity Corps in 2016. Erasmus plus has a specific action called [European Voluntary Service](#) (EVS) that provides the frame for volunteering actions in Europe, in Partner Countries and in Neighbour Countries. In particular, it allows the implementation of projects that tackle social and economic issues affecting local communities, recognising the role and the importance of volunteering as a fundamental tool of action.

[European Solidarity Corps](#) programme (ESC) aims to unify all the volunteering activities in Europe, providing an overall working framework for all the volunteering activities. In particular, ESC programme blend together two complementary strands: volunteering and occupational activities. Volunteering activities build on EVS as well as on other EU funding schemes. The occupational strand provides young people with the opportunity of a job, traineeship or apprenticeship in a wide range of sectors which are engaged in solidarity-related activities, therefore focusing on the local work of youth in their communities.

Finally, volunteering has also been incubated within another European programmes, more related to the International Cooperation sphere of competences of the European Commission. The [EU Aid Volunteers](#) programme gives the concrete possibility to European individuals to support communities in the world along a need-based approach.

Digital volunteers, volunteers in technology, corporate volunteers and digital youth working

An interesting research debate is related to the different definitions and nuances around the concept of volunteers engaged in digital education, understanding education in broad sense, conjugating formal, non-formal and informal knowledge processes.

In the assessed resources (indicated in the resources list), volunteerism is generally understood as being an activity with social impact involving individuals on the basis of their will or on the basis of their working programme. To be noticed is the current lack of assessment or integration of digital aspects of volunteering in the everyday mechanisms of volunteering itself, encouraging confusion in the volunteering sphere, decoupling digital skills empowerment from volunteering. For sure, one of the topics surging in the debate around youth working is the concept of digital youth working.

Firstly introduced on [“In Defence of Youth Work” \(2009\)](#), digital youth working is defined as

“values-led practice working with young people that takes account of the digital dimensions of young people’s lives, orienteering them and making them active users of their dimensions. It might be delivered through digital tools, using online environments or mobile communication; it might blend together physical and digital communication and collaboration; or it might take place face-to-face, but aware of and addressing issues raised by the digital world”.

So, basically the challenge for youth workers is to understand and embed digital media tools in an organic way to a) support young people to feel safe in a growing digital world; b) to use digital tools to promote youth work itself; c) to practically use digital tools for everyday youth working, encouraging and defining security lines in terms of social media usage.

Digital youth working could become the main horizon in the next years to practically assess, evaluate and implement volunteering in digital-related fields while embedding a number of soft skills that are crucial for personal development.

The authors define volunteers in technology as volunteers who use digital technologies to facilitate their work (tablets, emails, social media, coding activities etc.) and whose areas of interest are not necessarily about technology, but they can be varied and much different. Education is the bulk point of their actions and digital tools are functional to operate in society. They do not renounce to offline activities actively cooperating with ICT centres, research centres, schools etc.

Digital or virtual volunteers are mainly related to specific and time-bound objectives. They often work in relation to specific humanitarian missions, supporting the creation of platforms, communication networks. They mainly operate on distance, particularly in post-disaster situations.

Closely related to volunteering in digital education is digital youth working, which is more focused on creating the necessary environment for young people to acquire digital skills and to properly master social media usage. Many times, in fact, young people ignore the risks and the possibilities related to digital tools, hence they have to actively participate to discover their potential.

Finally, corporate volunteers seem to be quite popular in the European discussion, as part of the broader concept of corporate social responsibility. In particular, giants of the digital world are keen on defining programmes for their employees as part of their social impact. Often, this is practically done through partnerships with NGOs or non-profit organisations. Social impact is interpreted as the empowerment of different target groups, such as refugees, young people etc. Corporate volunteering is also about branding a corporation and creating a liaison with new generations.

European Digital Agenda, the fight against social exclusion and the role of volunteers

At first glance, volunteering and ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) seem not to be connected, but focusing on societal phenomena may lead one to understand

how they can be interrelated. Today, access to information and knowledge through ICT is considered to be an asset, a basic competence to apply for relevant vacancies, to interpret actions and manage to do everyday incumbencies. However, the combination of technological change, the collapse of traditional schemes (family, welfare state, job market) and globalisation have led to a new form of exclusion, which is about the ones who cannot cope with change. In particular, technology development has led to a number of new social interactions, like e-commerce, social networks, e-learning, e-citizenship processes, online procedures, augmented reality, etc.

In this way, people who have been left out from technological change face progressive social exclusion due to the impossibility of accessing basic services or not being able to understand some different public services. This is also part of a more general approach of the digital divide according to which digital access is not only related to digital infrastructures, but also on digital education programmes, actions and planning.

| Targets | Value | Year | Baseline EU 2012 |
|--|-------|------|------------------|
| Population using internet regularly | 75% | 2015 | 73% |
| Disadvantaged people using internet regularly | 60% | 2015 | 59.9% |
| Population having never used the internet | 15% | 2015 | 22.0% |
| Individuals using a mobile phone via 3G to access the internet | 35% | 2015 | 11.8% |

Table 1. Eurostat. Digital Agenda targets.

Inclusion strategies, also according to the general volunteer EU schemes, put emphasis on customised digital strategies by promoting volunteering as a tool to build equality, integration and inclusive society. The digital transformation that Europe is currently facing requires the perception of digital more as a social fact, rather than a mere technical feature to acquire. Hence, it is not just about formal curricula reforms or more training for works, but it is also about a more general view about digital that should take into account at least four main factors, namely: social, economic, educational and political ones.

Questionnaire planning & research

The questionnaire has been built upon the extensive framework of analysis as presented before in order to reach young people who were either volunteers in digital

technology or who have never approached volunteering. This has been functional to reflect on the concept of disempowerment and technology usage, an element that is progressively more and more important in the European context.

The main questions that research has to answer are:

1. What is the general vision of digital education by volunteers/young people?
2. What are the main constraints that impede volunteering to young people?
3. Is digital disempowerment related to communication gaps?

Therefore, the questionnaire was set to capitalise on closed-end questions and open ones, in order to allow to Raivotech project managers to use the questionnaire as a tool to discuss and support a more participatory profile to the applied research. What is more, the questionnaire was defined in order to set proper educational material, in this way not creating non-needed educational material that could much fit to the target group.

The full questionnaire is present as annex 1, and it has been set into 5 parts:

1. General background;
2. Volunteering motivations and difficulties;
3. Digital volunteering;
4. The management work of digital volunteers;
5. Main management problems when volunteering.

Results overview: first-level analysis

The first-level analysis has been based on the general structure of the questionnaire, in order to release a compact and quick overlook of the findings.

1. General background

The overall sample has been focused on young people who do not face too much of a burden, probably due to their condition of dependency on parents. Indeed, independently from this, volunteering is perceived as a fundamental value. There is a general overall balance between geographical origin, different social issues and encountered issues.

The target group actively involved in answering to questions comprehends 243 people – roughly 66% comprehends under-25-year-old people. Indeed, authors consider the results quite reliable due to the combination of different elements, such as the variety of people, their hobbies, work and interests.

Main general findings are:

- The composition of the target group can be observed to be divided into a few the main groups, namely: from Thessaloniki, Rome outskirts, Nicosia, and Luxembourg

(expats/volunteers). Each territory has different socio-economic problems and issues, making the study interesting in terms of different outcomes of questionnaire results.

- It is worth to observe that half of the interviewed sample is involved into STEM studies, more precisely 122 out 243 people. Interestingly, but probably it is not connected, the same number of people (122) is involved into digital-oriented organisations as volunteers.
- Male: 115; Female: 128; Others: 3. This means that the target group was shaped in a way to have contribution without too much gender bias. It is important to mention an interesting fact. Even though the Greek answers have mainly come from female interviewees, the balance between humanities/STEM-background sample has remained still. This is also against evidence of a gender gap in STEM. Indeed, it is possible to justify it through the transversal mission that the Hellas For Us association has.
- 139 out of 243 are students, while NEETs/unemployed are marginal in terms of data. This is suspicious in terms of data, but it might come from the fact that a relevant part of the sample is under 30, so still in educational patterns.
- Life enjoyment has likely data in Mediterranean country (even with differences between Cyprus and Greece, for instance, or between Greece and Italy), while Luxembourg shows perceived higher life standards and fewer everyday difficulties.
- Digital apps follow similar patterns in all of the countries with the exception of Luxembourg which shows higher age average, therefore work-related apps are used more than social apps.

In this way, volunteering does not seem to depend on specific local conditions – in all cases the majority of interviewees have expressed their volunteering activity as a fundamental action in society. One of the main issues matters is time. Different factors, then, come along when defining volunteering, above all in terms of resources invested (competencies, time, network etc.). This is also valid for digital volunteering.

Among general motivations, it is important to underline the different needs that the majority of interviewees have expressed in terms of the causes bringing to volunteering. A clear majority has connected volunteering to concepts as ‘changing society’, ‘aliveness in organisational goals’ and ‘reaching new ideas’ - in this way volunteering is seen as an engine for social change.

2. Volunteering motivations and difficulties

Volunteering has been seen as an important activity in terms of networking and Digital volunteering has not been seen as crucial by many, as part of the sample reflects about the incapacity of using technological items while others lack of specific interest in it. Certainly, causes are more profound and they will be analysed and defined later on.

Volunteering is generally seen in a more instrumental way than in the purely social sense – basically the majority of the sample engages in volunteering activities both to acquire new skills or for their adhering to organisation’s goals. 152 out of 243 have defined volunteering in this way, while only 85 people have expressed volunteering as a way to make a change. Families seem to have a smaller role in the choice of volunteering.

Basically, volunteering is seen as a personal growth tool, above all in times when skills and competencies are seen as a crucial set to boost employability. This focus is clearer in digital volunteering, although prejudices about digital education come along.

3. Digital volunteering

With regards to digital volunteering, the ones who have never started an activity related to digital education express their lack of interest as “they have enough knowledge”. In this case, the purely instrumental approach regarding volunteering appears again. At the same time, the sample stating this appears to completely confine digital volunteering as a matter of knowing technical items. In this way, the main component of digital education with its advocacy part and more inspirational part is set aside.

Substantially, when asked about “digital education” (d.e.), interviewees have defined either in a broad way or indicating elements related to technological hardware components. For instance, many interviewees have connected d.e. as the tools used to make lessons or how you make lessons (usage of whiteboards, Skype, robots, etc.), something that drives away from the very specific physical element of it is assumed to be traditional teaching. In the meantime, other relevant chunks words have been mainly connected to freedom, accessibility, gratuity etc. Yet, a smaller group has indicated the actual educational activities that could take place. In this sense, it seems that digital education is still confined to what you actually do and how you do it, not touching the dynamic process of ICT learning everyday skills embedded in citizenship practices.

In particular, it appears that digital volunteering has not been seen as “interesting” by a relevant part of the sample from Italy, Cyprus and Greece, with the exception of Luxembourg/mixed nationalities interviewees. This difference is a current trend in the findings, due to the specific settings of the capital of Luxembourg, as well as by the social extraction of the different people involved.

Networking also represents an important trigger for digital volunteering and partly the enhancement of capacities. In the minority of cases, the educational side of digital volunteering has been underlined or mentioned.

4. The management work of volunteers

In all cases, both with generic volunteering and digital activities, the presence of a senior volunteer has been a crucial figure to introduce new volunteers to the work. Only in limited cases, online courses have been used to introduce the new volunteer in order to get acquainted with the activities and to be prepared.

It seems that along the strategic lines of work with volunteers in tech (and more in general volunteers), communication and keeping the role of the group are the main focal points. In this sense, a few people have expressed the need in defining better ways in actually managing and retaining volunteers in what they do.

5. Main management problems when volunteering.

Digital technology does not seem to be a definitive when there is a more profound problem of leadership of unclearness of roles, at least this is what the sample shows.

Considering that an important part of interviewees are part of digital organisations, it seems that management issues and human resources management is a transversal problem regardless the specific mission of the association. However, different elements in management are shaped and influenced by the specific background of the territory. Particularly, small towns and bigger have a different order of issues that define the scope and the possibilities of an organisation.

In Luxembourg, the main problems are referred to the actual spaces of work and concrete possibilities of realising activities. In Greece (as well as Cyprus and Italy), lack of economic resources is considered to be one of the most important problems by a relevant part of the sample (64 people, one out of four). This is also connected to activities related to digital volunteering (or volunteering in technology), as they heavily affect work quality.

Other serious issues, are the following ones, according to the analysis done:

- Involving new people in the organisations in terms of volunteering is seen by 47 people as one of the most complex tasks within an organisation. This is also partly connected to 37 people stating that volunteers do not show consistent behaviour with regards to their work, this also overlaps with 29 of the sample affirming the problem of retaining them.
- Leadership problem is not seen as a crucial issue, but rather communication as many of the sample define a lack of transparency and sharing within organisations.

The analytical framework & the questionnaire results: analysis

1. What is the general vision of digital education by volunteers/young people?

From the results obtained, digital education is partly seen as the overall process of acquiring, exchanging, defining a digital citizen who manages to combine a variety of transversal skills to better use technology. It is seen as a set of hardware elements (computers, Skype apps, etc.) or as a generic concept related to evolution – this means that digital education is not seen as an embedded tool for the overall educational processes.

This is further related to the opinion part of interviewees have about activities of digital-oriented organisations – many have doubts about their technological skills and they also have expressed the risk of boredom with regards to digital activities.

Indeed, it is possible to observe a specific overall mismatch in terms of communication with reference to digital education. One of the main recommendations that might ignite and support the process of boosting digital education is referred to attracting youth, as well as to making them understand the specific importance of acquiring through professionals digital skills. In fact, many youth (mainly coming from STEM study branches) have stated their lack of need to start any pattern related to digital education. This is again related to a specific image of digital education as a set of courses to learn something in specific, while digital education is also about the action that one has a civic actor within a digital society.

Definitely, this is part of the answer to dis-empowerment. At this specific European time, volunteers in technology have a pivotal role, namely to act in society and involve young people in digital education. However, they need better preparation and higher mentoring both in terms of contents and in understanding their own mission. For this reason, one of the goals of Raising Volunteers in Tech – Raivotech has been to determine basic learning goals with regards to volunteers management and up-skilling in digital volunteering.

2. What are the main constraints that impede volunteering to young people?

Assessing the different analysed elements, it seems that one could divide constraints in three categories, namely: external (to the organisation), and internal (to the organisation) and individual. Substantially, volunteering depends on a number of elements that are not only related to the goals of the individuals but also to the specific settings in which volunteering is held.

With reference to individual matters, one of the main elements that hold young people from investing resources in volunteering is related to time and to communication. In fact, a steady minority of possible volunteers have appeared to renounce to volunteering “because they do not know where they can be volunteers” (according to the answer of the questionnaire). This means that communication factors come into play and determine also the way in which young people approach to volunteering. This is also one of the leading factors in terms of understanding volunteering in technology or digital volunteering: the possible wrong idea regarding these ones discourages part of the youth to start any connected activities.

Indeed, volunteering as such is still thought mainly in the social-relief kind of manner. That means that digital volunteering is still limited or used by more complex organisations, such as all those ones involved in reconstruction actions and digital mapping after natural disasters. In this way, digital volunteering is not yet associated with the normal activities of smaller organisations to which most of the interviewed sample belong. In fact, digital volunteering is seen through the usage of online tools or strategies, but it does not involve structural elements, at least this is an ongoing process which will probably take place in a wider way in the next future.

This is not only related to a pure ‘internal’ factor of the organisations, but also to the more general strategy present in the European Union as digital volunteering is still not considered among the actions of volunteering. This specific element will be discussed in the final paragraph of the work with specific recommendations in terms of volunteers and digital work.

External constraints to volunteering are those referred to the local or general economic, social, labour or technological conditions that impede from taking up volunteering activities or make them so hard that they will affect the concrete volunteer endeavour. According to the framework used, the authors have explored different elements regarding volunteers and their volunteering. It seems that their local settings (urban transport, security etc.) all seem to be preconditions to volunteering. For instance, in the case of the Italian sample, the sample is mainly located in suburbs that suffer from an impossibility of moving as they were in a larger urban area, as well as they cannot afford the same variety of services

and volunteering offer. Such inflection in terms of transportation determines hardships in reaching out volunteering venues, hence the impossibility of concretely volunteer.

One of the most outstanding factors that is detrimental to volunteering activities is related to unemployment. When unemployed, young people seem to show that volunteering ‘steals’ time instead of giving opportunities to boost their competencies and to favour their activeness into society. Unemployment creates insecurity (in social terms), but such a situation is contrasted by the social bonds that seem to be important when taking up a volunteer activity. Part of the volunteers has started volunteering activities thanks to their family or other social bonds, such as acquaintances and other volunteers who have engaged their peers into volunteering.

Social networks do not seem to have relevant roles as this is also shown by a concrete mismatch in communication – a relevant part of possible volunteers does not seem to know about volunteering offers, as already discussed. Surely, this is one of the crucial elements to take into consideration in the next paragraph.

Internal elements that weaken volunteering actions are all related to the same functioning and decision-making/communication process within the associations, organisations and others face during their work. At the moment, it is not possible to state a direct correlation between organisational problems and volunteering dropout, as this is not the goal of the present work. However, organisational issues are also part of the empowerment process of volunteering, in particular they are faced both in purely volunteering organisations as well as in organisation oriented to digital education.

What strikes the most are elements related to decision-making and the communication process, as many times volunteers are only related to the practical work, but they are not involved in the process of delivering specific actions. Such a situation is also related to a lack of recognition in terms of volunteering work – free labour, not full exploitation of volunteers engagement or competencies are at the basis of disaffection with regards to volunteering. Therefore, the RaiVoTech mission has been focused also in training youth workers to better define ways in retaining volunteers, bettering the overall process of tech volunteers management.

3. Is digital disempowerment related to communication gaps?

Authors suspect that one of the striking discoverings of this paper is related to the mis-communication around two main themes, digital education (d.e.) and digital education-oriented organisations (deos). Substantially, the sample has expressed the lack of interest for digital education elements for *de* and *deos* not based on previous informational work, but based on their beliefs and prior knowledge. In particular, there are different elements to be depicted:

- Young people involved in STEM studies feeling that deos do not add anything to their studies, assuming that deos are echoing mechanisms in terms of technical knowledge;
- Young people not involved in STEM studies do not showing concrete understanding of what digital education can represent, and that deep technological knowledge is not needed;



- Several young people volunteering are not involved at the level of the communication process within organisations, therefore not grasping the elements related to digital education.
- Digital education is not seen in its broad view, not in non-formal education or in advocacy work.

Authors can comfortably assume that there is a strong correlation between the communication gap between organisations and volunteers, as well as in terms of projected image (how digital education is perceived) and in terms of organisation identity (volunteers not involved in the communication process).

Proposals

It is important to reflect about the framework re-adapted from Van Windem (2003). It is not just the ICT skills that determine how much exclusion can be measured, but how the informational process mediates between exclusion and dis-empowerment. Therefore, what authors can conclude is that two lines of work can be concretely empowered:

- Ameliorate the work in terms of digital youth organisation management along a number of themes;
- Boost digital education advocacy work, explaining to young people the fallacy of 'digital natives' and how continuous learning is needed to grasp real competences in digital-related themes.
- Support communication work to inform young people in a more extensive way with regards to volunteering offer. This may be reached through better coordination in terms of local stakeholders, as well as in making informational platforms more known.
- Enhance and integrate digital volunteering into the European Solidarity Corps strategy to introduce digital approach on volunteering, as well as in reflecting how corporate volunteering can impact on more wide-known volunteering.

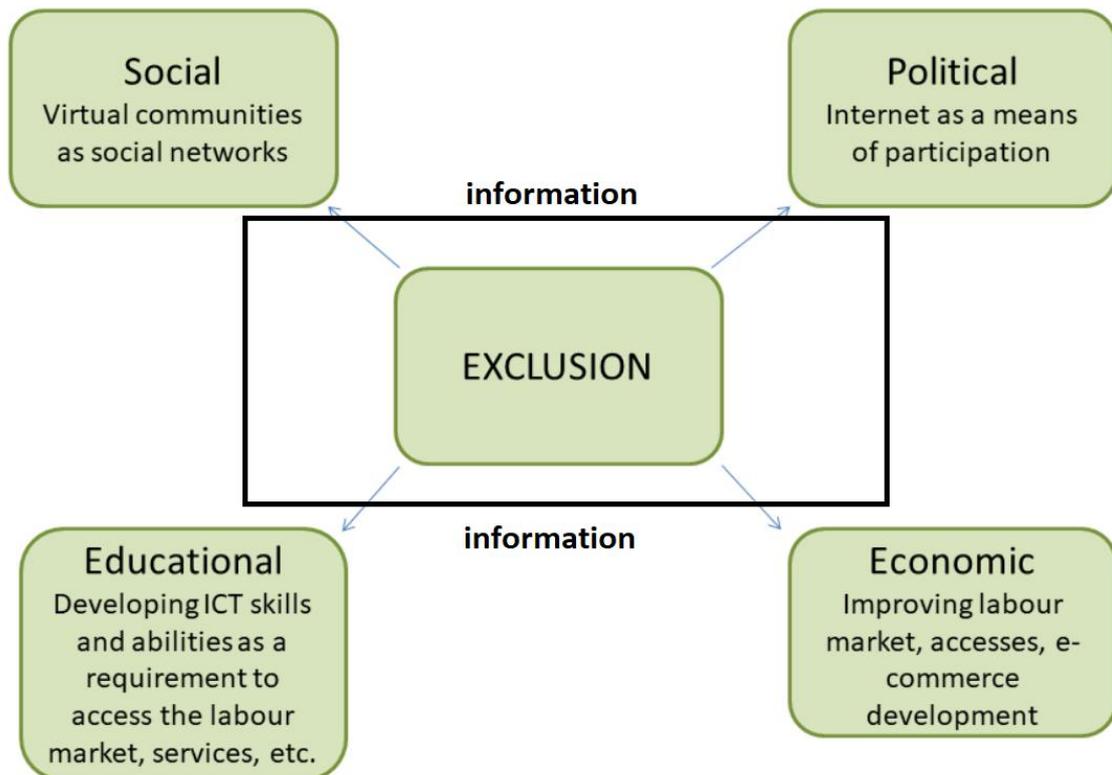


Figure 2: Social exclusion as the result of mis-communication process from different second layers. Re-adapted from (Van Winden, 2003).

Bibliography

Van Winden, W. (2003), Essays on Urban ICT Policies, PhD thesis, Tinbergen Institute, Erasmus University Rotterdam. 2002.



Annex 1 - the questionnaire

NOT ONLY DIGITAL VOLUNTEERS

Welcome to Not only digital volunteers! Your participation is fundamental to enhance association work and to help at improving resources for you.

General data

Gender Region

Age range 13-17 18-19 20-25 26-30 31-35 35+

1. Background

Position (student/freelance/worker/unemployed/NEET)

Diploma Field

Previous volunteer experiences (relevant):

| Field | Organisation (if you want to indicate it) | Organisation contact (if you want to indicate it) | Period (month/year-month/year) |
|-------|---|---|--------------------------------|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

What do you think about the area you live in? (J J completely agree; L L completely disagree)

| Service | J J | J | J? | L? | L L |
|---|-----|---|----|----|-----|
| Good public transport | | | | | |
| Available public services for young people (Mobility info-points, free business consulting centres) | | | | | |
| Youth events are available throughout the year | | | | | |
| It is possible to find job vacancies in my field | | | | | |
| There are many volunteering organisations | | | | | |



| | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| Making business is relatively not complicated | | | | | |
| All my friends work | | | | | |
| People think my area is secure (low criminality/low violence etc) | | | | | |
| There are less than 10% immigrants | | | | | |
| There are many educational centres | | | | | |
| I expect to live here in the next 5 years | | | | | |

List the first 10 WORDS you think when you read the term DIGITAL

.....

Social networks you use

Instant messaging apps you use

Online video chatting (e.g. Messenger, Skype, Colibri)

If you have a Facebook profile:

- a. I am a member of information/interest groups
- b. I have created an interest group/a social page
- c. It is my main newsfeed
- d. other

If you have a LinkedIn profile:

- a. I am a member of information/interest groups
- b. I have created an interest group
- c. I regularly share job endeavours/job-related news/articles
- d. I mainly use it as a tool for job search
- e. other

Communities you attend (if any) (e.g. change.org, avaaz.org)

Do you have a blog (if any)?

Have you ever created an internet page (if any)?

Which free tools do you use to share your contents (if any)? (e.g. Google Drive, Dropbox, OneDrive)

Which free planning tools do you use (if any)? (Trello, Asana, OpenProject)

Which programmes do you also use?

Have you used MOOC/online tutorials/e-learning services? If yes, which? (e.g. online language course, ECDL online, University MOOC etc.)

Which open-source initiatives/programmes/etc do you also know?

If you have taken volunteering activities, please fill the following section. If not, go to section 2.1.



2. Why have you started volunteering?

- a. My friends volunteer
- b. I have been interested in the goals of the organisations I volunteered for
- c. I love to practically participate to the presented activities
- d. Volunteering will help my career
- e. Volunteering helps me to feel better about society
- f. I can get new perspectives/exchange ideas on things/community issues
- g. I can put in practice/test my theoretical knowledge/competences
- h. other

2.1 Why not?

- a. I have never had enough time
- b. Thematic organisations were far from my house
- c. I didn't have the car/bus/etc. to reach the venue
- d. I was never interested because I needed money/I think nothing can change/I think volunteering does not give anything more than you can learn at school/university/work

2.2 Have you ever considered taking up volunteering in digital-oriented organisations?

YES (go to section 3) NOT (go to the next question)

Because

- a. I think I cannot handle programming tools
- b. I think I cannot use computers well and I wouldn't be of much help
- c. It can be a boring and repetitive activity
- d. I don't know how to use social media
- e. I am more interested in arts and more creative activities and ICT doesn't support this
- f. People interested in ICT are usually nerds or not very sociable
- g. ICT organisations are not very friendly
- h. I know ICT stuff very well and I don't need to join any organisation
- i. I don't want to share my knowledge in ICT because people should learn by themselves at schools/universities/private centres/etc.
- j. other reasons.....

THANKS FOR THE COLLABORATION! KEEP POSTED WITH RAIIVOTECH!

3. Going digital

3.1 Why have you started working in issues through digital tools?

- a. Personal interest grown within my family /friends/by reading magazines/etc.
- b. I studied (e.g. robotics/programming/database management/digital heritage management/digital communication etc.) at school/university
- c. I took part to a digital-related activity by an association/in a fair
- d. I took part to online courses on specific themes about my interests
- e. I am aware that developing specific skills in the digital field my enhance my career/perspectives

- f. I think that digital learning is very important in our society
- g. others

3.2 Have you ever organised an ICT event? If yes, on which topic?

- a)..... b).....c).....

On which topics do you love/would you love to work on? (1=max preference; 5=min preference)

- 1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....

4. Your tasks as volunteer

4.1 Which were/have been your duties? Write your tasks in a specific way. If multiple, indicate the organisation and the task (e.g. I had to teach coding for 3 hours per week to 8-10 year-old children; I had to take care of 5-9 year-old-children through group activities)

| Organisation (if you want to indicate it) | Time: n. hours/n.days | What | Final users |
|---|-----------------------|------|-------------|
| | | | |

4.2 Did your duties match up with your expectations?

- a. Not at all b. Partially c. Mostly d. I agree e. I completely agree f. I did more than expected

4.3 How did the organisation introduce you to the work? Put 1,2,3 etc. according to the frequency of cases

- a. It didn't help me at all
- b. It gave me some general information, asking to use available resources
- c. A workshop/staff introductory meeting
- d. I have meetings when new things come up
- e. There are plenty of resources online/offline, well-structured and easy to access
- f. On-going learning is provided with periodic assessment meetings
- g. Other

4.4 How was the learning you had (if any), useful?

- a. It was of little usage because it was limited/fragmented
- b. It was of little usage because it was not really related to activities to be done (too theoretical, very long etc.)
- c. It was of some usage because I could use it for the activities, but I had to do more research
- d. It was of good usage (well presented, clear, sound explanations, smart formats etc.)
- e. It was of excellent usage as it made me do new things learning from real case studies
- f. other

4.5 Which was the learning material you had? Then, put numbers in order of desirability (1= max preference; 5= min preference)

- a. Online course (downloadable material, videos, exercises, webinar)
- b. Practical sessions
- c. Workshops with association members



- d. Introduction course (before the voluntary activities would have started)

4.6 In case you have answered a), could you state how approximately they lasted? (e.g. hours per week)

| Name of the course | Hours | Number of weeks | website | Was it good? (max 5, min 1) |
|--------------------|-------|-----------------|---------|-----------------------------|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

5. Your point of view

5.1 Which were/have been the main hardships? Multiple choice.

organisational issues

- Not really clear roles (e.g. people often took over my duties without asking, everyone was involved in everything, I didn't really know what others were doing)
- Lack of engagement of people (I was alone in achieving the tasks as it was not organisation's business to support me)
- Rare meetings/not effective coordination meetings
- Assigned tasks not adapted to my competences
- Tasks unevenly distributed (someone centralised many tasks)
- Activities do not match with the stated mission
- I was often not really free of structuring the activities in the way I wanted (too much control)
- Other

communication problems

- The organisation didn't use tools I use,..... for instance (e.g. Google Drive, etc.)
- I was not involved in main decisions (they forgot me in the mailing lists/I was informed with delay/ I couldn't state my opinion/ My opinion wasn't taken into consideration/ I was put down/I was not informed about on-going projects)
- No shared contact database (I couldn't access to previously collected contacts)
- Meetings weren't very fruitful and important decisions were taken outside the meetings
- Messages with opposite/missing information
- I didn't get along well with the other members
- Other



5.2 Have you ever organised an event? Y N

If YES, what were the main issues you have met? Put them in order

- a. Involving other people from the association in supporting the event was very hard
- b. Lack of economic resources/crowdfunding was difficult
- c. Reaching the target group/the event results was complicated
- d. Not clear strategy and weak event planning/promotion
- e. Location was not proper/properly arranged
- f. Implementing team not clear/responsibilities not well distributed
- g. I was involved only in last minute decisions
- h. other

5.3 If you organised an event on ICT/ICT awareness, which were the main issues?

.....

5.4 Other comments?

.....

THANKS FOR YOUR COLLABORATION!

Annex 2 - Good practices

[Handbook for e-volunteering](#)

[Outreach digital](#)

[Microsoft for non-profits](#)

[Google for non-profits](#)

[Createthegood.org](#)