IFRC Digital Consultations - Digital Volunteering
INSIGHTS
**PURPOSE OF THE DOCUMENT**

Digital transformation is one of seven transformations agreed upon in [IFRC STRATEGY 2030](#). The Digital and Data Working Group organized a series of digital consultations to collect practical input on what it concretely means for the Red Cross Red Crescent. The theme of the first round of consultations was digital volunteering. National Societies from across the globe connected to share their say and give input.

This document presents subsequent insights to increase the understanding of digital volunteering.

**CONSULTATION**

Since the founding of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, volunteerism is essential in the way we work. The world is changing however and so is volunteerism. Digital technologies play an increasingly important role in our work and influence the way we collaborate. Distances becomes less relevant and skills more easily accessible. Yet, the availability of skills becomes less predictable and communicating effectively through digital means is simply more challenging than communicating in person.

Digital volunteering is emerging. To understand what it means and how the National Societies (NS) and the broader Movement can harness this new way of volunteering, the consultations aimed at:

- Defining digital volunteering
- Identifying ways to engage in digital volunteering

The consultations were attended by 49 persons from the IFRC and 28 National Societies across all regions. A big “thank you” to them!

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1 Source: consultations notes by participants, as of April 21st 2020
DESCRIBING DIGITAL VOLUNTEERING

Digital volunteering is a vast concept that is not limited by boundaries. It enables people to commit to the social good without having to commute, with impact on local or global scale. The consultation showed the need to define digital volunteering for matters of communication and to establish the foundation of volunteering strategies in the digital age both locally and globally. Yet, reaching a universally relevant definition seems unrealistic; it should be localized, contextualized to needs and, most importantly, owned. This document provides insights on the types of content shared, or topics raised during the digital consultations. The quotes presented are from anonymous participants*.

Summary of topics and share of conversation

Note: data collected from collaborative notes taking during 6 calls on a 3 weeks range in April 2020.
Organizational Support

“Working with digital volunteers, allows the movement to maximize volunteer’s engagement in a time- and cost-efficient manner”

The topic “organizational support” covers business opportunities for the Red Cross Red Crescent in embracing digital volunteerism.

1. Digital volunteers are crucial for the future of the Movement, because volunteers are the heart of the movement;
2. With digital tools, digital volunteers can provide remote support to the Movement in expanding its activities in the areas of operation;
3. Digital has the potential to reduce activity-related costs and increase scale;
4. Digital volunteers can help local offices to continue services if circumstances require them to shut down. This is especially apparent with COVID-19, but remains valid in other situations. For example, when Zagreb, Croatia, was hit by a series of small earthquakes, volunteers worked from home instead of the office and were, therefore, able to remain active;
5. Digital provides an opportunity to establish partnerships with other organizations on digital volunteer engagement.

Infrastructure

“It’s a challenge to include volunteers who don’t have the resources or skills to connect digitally”

The topic “infrastructure” highlights the basic technology requirements for facilitating digital volunteering.

If the Movement wants to embrace the opportunity of digital volunteering, its components and National Societies will need to be aware of and address the following:

1. Digital Divide:
   • Internet is not equally accessible for all;
   • Not all NS have the same technical resources and tools available to be able to facilitate digital volunteering;
   • Not all volunteers or communities have the same skills and/or resources to connect digitally. Can we reach them digitally? How?
2. Good tools and digital resources may be available, but not in all (local) languages.
“Digital volunteering provides more people with more diverse opportunities to contribute at moments and locations most suitable to them”

The topic “access” emphasizes that digital can provide a way into volunteering that otherwise may have not been available.

Opportunities are:
1. To contribute without having to commute. This is an opportunity for people who, for example, live in rural areas without a RCRC Office nearby, and for whom traveling entails a high investment in time and money;
2. To contribute without having to commit to strict time requirement or social obligations;
3. To provide access to volunteering to those with physical constraints;
4. To provide access to the areas of operation without having to be present;
5. To support without putting lives at risk, and to deliver what is needed from a safer area;
6. Digital volunteerism is a low barrier way of starting one's engagement with the RCRC;
7. A great possibility of inclusion and interaction across borders.

"Finally, I can now do voluntary work for the Red Cross on this digital path, even with my disability", volunteer’s quote collected by the Swiss Red Cross.

“Some training is needed to transition certain volunteer roles into digital volunteering.”

The topic “Skills” covers both digital skills and the expansion of volunteering opportunities that they provide, while taking into consideration the various local contexts.

1. There is not one single profile or form of digital volunteering;
2. Training is needed to transition certain volunteer roles into digital volunteering. It can be challenging;
3. Digital allows distance learning, sharing knowledge and skills;
4. Digital enables the NS to access skills that they wouldn't access otherwise;
5. There's a digital divide, but all NSs can benefit from digital volunteering in a way or another;
6. Younger people are easier to reach because they are usually more digitally skilled;
7. Need to adapt to the tools that people know or are comfortable with.
"The current crisis underlines the potential of Digital Volunteers as we come up with more services to target groups and remove the limitations of location"

The topic “Tasks” covers practical contributions that digital volunteers can make thanks to their combination of digital and non-digital skills, including skills traditionally associated with the RCRC.

1. Digital and offline activities are complementary;
2. Some activities can be transposed in the digital space, others not;
3. Behavioral requirements are different in the digital space;
4. Translating the flow of tasks for volunteers is a challenge;
5. Measuring the impact of digital volunteering can be a challenge;
6. Tasks can be done at different times, for different durations and potentially round the clock;
7. Tasks can be both traditional tasks transposed in the digital space or new tasks;
8. Tasks need to be very clear and well defined;
9. Knowing their skills allows appropriate matching of volunteers with tasks;
10. Digital activities may draw volunteers’ attention and interest, but non-digital tasks still need to be done.

"Social interaction is an important part of motivating volunteers but sending meaningful tasks to the Digital Volunteers is also important to keep them engaged."

The topic “motivation” sheds light on how digital volunteering is first and foremost about humans that have emotions, habits, desires that can potentially be fulfilled or challenged in the digital space and need to be cared for.

Digital volunteering:
1. Allows people to benefit from the rewards of supporting social good without being exposed to risks on the area of operations;
2. Has the potential to create or strengthen a sense of belonging to the Movement across borders;
3. Requires particular attention in maintaining motivation during peace times, where contribution possibilities are lower;
4. Can be isolating and, therefore, decrease motivation;
5. Can be a deterrent for the non-digital-savvy;
6. Can increase motivation and engagement for those whose skills are essentially digital or those that are willing to acquire these skills;
7. Requires providing resourceful and interesting online activities for volunteers.
Volunteer Management

“Supporting people to take humanitarian action in their households and communities”

Volunteer management addresses the steps that need to be taken to recruit, onboard and supervise volunteers. Traditional approaches which have been face-to-face may not be relevant, and juridical requirements may apply. Sub-topics of concern regarding volunteer management are:

1. **Recruitment.** How to:
   - Find the right digital volunteers?
   - Raise awareness of digital volunteering opportunities?

2. **Onboarding.** How to ensure:
   - Compliance with RCRC principles and standards?
   - A sense of being an equal part of the Movement?
   - Proper training?

3. **Supervision.** How to do:
   - Regular recruitment meetings when there are not face-to-face meetings?
   - Track volunteers’ activities and experienced workload?
   - Build trust in the digital space, especially with people you don’t know?

4. **Juridical.** How to
   - Reward per diems if the volunteer is active in a place where different tax laws apply?
   - Conduct a background check (required for some NS) before volunteers are allowed to start their activities?
   - Address insurance concerns?

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Reach

“It’s a challenge to reach some people that are usually our beneficiaries.”

The topic “reach” covers both the increase in reach enabled by digital volunteering and the incompleteness of the scaling process, in particular those in more vulnerable contexts.

1. Opportunity to support populations without putting lives at risks (e.g. in outbreak contexts);
2. Digital volunteering allows to localize solutions (e.g. translation and communication in local languages);
3. Access to real time information and services poorly accessible in the physical space;
4. Activities can be scaled up thanks to digital volunteering, more people can be supported, but those unlikely to benefit from it are those in higher vulnerability situations;
5. While some hard to reach and isolated populations are being reached thanks to digital tools, some communities still remain out of reach (see infrastructure and skills);
6. Younger people are easier to reach digitally while older people may remain off the radar.
Examples

While many National Societies are still looking at developing digital volunteering models, the COVID-19 crisis allowed for a range of spontaneous initiatives. A frequently mentioned example was psycho-social support. National Societies have onboarded new and existing volunteers to provide community support via digital support groups, chat rooms and phone lines, which have proven to be a great success. Some other tasks that digital volunteers have been working on are:

- Communication activities: translation, design, developing and reviewing content;
- Developing e-learning and training modules;
- Pro-bono digital services: for example by developers or consultants;
- Data and digital services: mapping, GIS;
- Research tasks: desk-reviews, report writing.

Numerous digital volunteering initiatives have been shared during the consultations, including some launched before the COVID-19 crisis. The Australian Red Cross ran a crowd-sourced model of digital volunteering to activate people as ambassadors or activists during the bushfires that struck the country at for various months from late 2019 to early 2020. The NS created a digital community to support digital advocates focusing on supporting people to take humanitarian action in their households and communities. The digital community is a space where people can join up and talk with each other and self-organize. This was created because people who registered to volunteer after the bushfires would not hear from Australian Red Cross for some time simply because there were too many. The NS also launched REDxYouth, supporting engagement and participation of young people through social media channels.
HOW CAN WE ENGAGE IN DIGITAL VOLUNTEERING?

Having identified the main topics to focus on with digital volunteering, the remainder of this document focuses on the second round of consultations, which investigated how to practically engage in digital volunteering. Participants were asked to assess practical implications of digital volunteering on three levels:

- **Movement**: what can the movement do to facilitate digital volunteering?
- **National Societies**: how should National Societies incorporate new and existing volunteers in their digital work?
- **Volunteers**: what are volunteers’ needs in order to contribute their time and skills digitally?

Approaching volunteering in “traditional” terms, confines volunteering to a geographic territory, with face-to-face interaction, close supervision, and a trusted, sustainable relationship between the organization and the volunteer. While this quality of volunteering certainly should not be disregarded, it still presents some limitations in terms of collaboration and reach. Digital volunteering has the potential to expand activities, as it is not limited by boundaries. “Boundaries” refers here to factual borders but also conceptual limitations. Digital enables volunteers to contribute to operational activities beyond the container of a given National Society; they can extend their activities transnationally, and they can do so in a distributive and collaborative manner.

In assessing practical implications of digital volunteering, participants mentioned that digital volunteering has to be **designed** in accordance with each National Societies’ needs. Further practical considerations were mentioned regarding **running** digital volunteering systems. Keys to designing and running digital volunteering systems are 1) **connecting**, 2) **sharing knowledge**, and 3) **advocating**.

**(Co-)Design it**

The first round of consultations emphasized a basic requirement for facilitating digital volunteering: infrastructure. If the Movement and National Societies aim to embrace digital volunteering, they should prioritize designs and mechanisms to facilitate it.

The second round of consultations clarified that besides technical facilitation, the Movement and National Societies should set a stage to further facilitate digital volunteering. The Movement should work towards a clear strategy, shared vocabulary and consistent conditions for digital volunteering. This can be done by:

- Creating shared agendas, action plans and a common strategy;
- Setting up working groups and further movement-wide discussions;
- Leveraging with the Volunteer Alliance;
- Setting minimum requirements of how digital volunteers can contribute;
- Review existing projects and define opportunities for digital volunteers;
- Developing guidelines or blueprints;
- Developing platforms and programs for digital volunteers to support each other (e.g. mentorship programs);
- Developing e-learning material to train digital volunteers according to the foundational principles and values of the RCRC.
Some participants have called for the development of a common digital volunteer management system. Such a common system would not only foster consistent management, but also provide a platform for (potential) volunteers to access opportunities to share their time and skills digitally. The Movement could investigate whether such a common system is feasible and desirable. The border-crossing potential of digital volunteers should be carefully considered as it has wide ranging implications in terms of relationship management and legal frameworks. Rules that apply for volunteers in one National Society, may differ from those that apply in another one.

**Implement it**

The consultations showed the importance of recruiting new digital volunteers, but also to mind incorporating existing volunteers digitally in their operational activities. How should National Societies go about incorporating new and existing volunteers digitally? How to focus on the volunteer journey?

- Build on existing platforms, and see how digital volunteers can contribute to developing those;
- Recruit/screen in the digital space, for instance by means of automated chatbots on the websites of National Societies;
- Support volunteers in transforming to the digital space: train new and existing volunteers on how to work digitally, raise awareness of the capacity of digital;
- Develop tasks that suit the digital, mobile environment to adapt to volunteers' capabilities (e.g. tasks that can be done on a mobile phone);
- Monitor volunteer motivation to attend to their needs.
- Volunteer coordinators should be ready to provide technical support and provide clear guidelines on how to work digitally, including user manuals for the tools required to execute the work.
ENABLERS

Connecting

Modern technology enables a quantitative increase of volunteer opportunities. National societies should consider connecting volunteers on two levels:

- **Technical**: facilitating the work of volunteers technically. For example, National Societies provide devices to volunteers, and others provide reimbursements for using internet or personal equipment to ensure that they can do their digitally-enabled tasks;
- **Social**: facilitating social connection among volunteers and with staff. Volunteer motivation depends for a large part on social recognition and community feeling; it is crucial to attend to such human needs in a digital space. National Societies should foster digital community building at Movement level and with both existing and potential volunteers (for instance through online fora, social media, webinars, teleconferences, etc.).

Sharing knowledge

A recurring topic during the consultations was the need for a collaborative mindset: National Societies need to support one another in adapting digital volunteering. There is a growing number of resources available across the Movement: case studies, lessons learnt, toolkits, insights, etc. There should be a clear go-to resource for digital volunteering to:

- Serve as a reference point or sharing space;
- Nurture innovative approaches to digital volunteering;
- Add value to participants of online digital volunteer communities.

Now is the time to foster collaboration in order to use the opportunity of digital to its full potential.

Advocating

Digital volunteering is something new for most of our Movement’s components. To incorporate it, the Movement should work to increase awareness on its potential with attention to local needs, capacities and experience with volunteering. Campaigns should target various audiences, with the following objectives:

- Increasing participation in the digital pledge;
- Top management, staff and current volunteers will develop an understanding of the related opportunities and challenges of digital; Existing examples should be leveraged;
- Potential new volunteers gain an understanding into how the RCRC works with digital volunteers, and what their potential learning and personal development curves may be as a digital volunteer. The RCRC brand, potential mentorship programs and the opportunity to impact beyond borders with modularity could be valuable assets.

How to reach the audience:

- Through current volunteers and volunteer networks;
- Through diaspora networks, as they might have an interest to contribute to their country of origin;
- Through workgroups;
- Through partnerships with other organizations and the corporate sector.
WHAT’S NEXT?

To embrace digital volunteering, National Societies will have to reflect on their digital capacities and those of the communities they serve. They will have to identify how digital volunteers can add value to pursuing their organizational objectives and who can or cannot be a digital volunteer. Thinking digital volunteering requires thinking in terms of network – roles, connections and resilience – rather than in terms of territory or location. This may challenge previous practices and policies that might need to be revised.

The outputs of these consultations will inform the IFRC’s Digital Transformation strategy as well as the work of the Volunteer Alliance. We welcome National Societies to use these insights to shape their digital volunteering journey.

The consultations on Digital Volunteering were done online and led by 510 (an initiative of the Netherlands Red Cross) and the Secretariat of the IFRC, with support from the Norwegian Red Cross.

- 510: Liselot Kattemöle (co-author) & Joachim Ramakers
- Dirk Slater from Fabriders supported session design and facilitation.

Participants came from the IFRC Secretariat and the following National Societies:

- Albanian Red Cross
- American Red Cross
- Australian Red Cross
- Bangladesh Red Crescent Society
- British Red Cross
- Croatian Red Cross
- Croix-Rouge de Belgique
- Egyptian Red Crescent
- Hellenic Red Cross
- Honduran Red Cross
- Japanese Red Cross
- Latvian Red Cross
- Lithuanian Red Cross
- Malaysian Red Cross
- Monaco Red Cross
- The Netherlands Red Cross
- New Zealand Red Cross
- Nigerian Red Cross
- Norwegian Red Cross
- Palestine Red Crescent
- Portuguese Red Cross
- Slovenian Red Cross
- Spanish Red Cross
- Swedish Red Cross
- Swiss Red Cross
- Tunisian Red Crescent
- Turkish Red Crescent