Guideline "Possibilities and Limitations of Adapting Offline Activities to Digital Sphere"

Practical tips for the transformation process

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1.Introduction

Digitalisation, catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic, has emerged as a megatrend and found its way into all areas of life, volunteering being no exception.

On the one hand, this development has open two directions: one would be the simplification/digitalization of volunteer management and the second would be diversification of volunteering opportunities. On the other, the use of digital tools and methods has also shown that not everything can and should be digitalised.

This document deals with the limits and challenges of digital work and also describes examples of best practice - where digitalisation has worked very well and opened up new perspectives for volunteering.

2. Selected areas

Digitalisation in volunteering offers many opportunities and possibilities. Meetings and activities can be held regardless of location and time to some extent. Online activities can also be carried out from home, provided that the necessary equipment is available.

We analysed uses of digitalisation in volunteering in terms of opportunities and limitations. We focused on areas that were affected in both positive and negative ways as well as those that need to be handled with particular care.
The partners involved contributed their experiences and researched secondary literature.

The following areas were identified as having been affected in both negative and positive ways:

- Online meetings
- Information dissemination

3. Online-Meetings

Nothing is discussed more ambivalently than the inflated number of online meetings. While they offer incredible opportunities, the difficulties and challenges of online meetings must also be brought to our attention.

3.1. Potentials of Online Meetings

Digitalisation in volunteering offers many opportunities and possibilities.
Meetings and activities can be held regardless of location and, in some cases, time. Online activities can also be carried out from home, provided the necessary equipment is available.

Time independence is possible when you can work asynchronously - i.e. in different time zones, and online presence is also simple and uncomplicated.

The great potential of online meetings is quick coordination without much effort. One does not have to leave the office and saves time. The reduced mobility also saves resources and protects the climate.
The existence of collaborative tools that make it possible to work simultaneously on the same document, sharing documents, also offers opportunities for improved participation and joint creation.

3.2. Challenges of Online Meetings

The most common mistake is to try to recreate offline sessions online in exactly the same way, without taking into account that different rules apply. Online sessions can be more strenuous than offline sessions for several reasons:

- Lack of physical activity (no commute, no walk during lunch break, etc.)
- Breaks are forgotten
- Constantly looking at one's own video (offline, no one would spend hours looking in a mirror, but online we are constantly exposed to our own image)
- Videos suggest more intimacy (in real life we would never stare at someone for several minutes, but online this can happen as we project the other person's video screen onto our screen and the other person may not even notice; on the other hand, we fail when we try to make eye contact)
- Our brain is more easily overloaded because we focus not only on the speaker but on all the participants and the presentation (and sometimes on our emails etc.) at the same time
- Lack of non-verbal communication: even in videos, participants usually stare at their own image or at the screen and never look directly at the camera; even presenters or speakers sit instead of standing up, which leads to a lack of non-verbal communication
- Participation is made more difficult, dialogues take place rather than discussions, which is due to the type of medium

- Participation opportunities can be used as an instrument of power - voice, voting, information sharing (also sharing documents) – are all opportunities not universally accessible
- Online meetings need different tools than offline meetings, such as physical exercise, voting, discussions etc.
- In addition to the methods that are used, the facilitator must also have the necessary technical skills and instruments/tools so that a meeting can be organised efficiently and effectively.
- The main limitation is that there is no natural socialising which usually occurs during lunch or coffee breaks. Without these off-topic interactions, there is a different group dynamic and individuals might be more hesitant to speak up because they have difficulties navigating in the virtual room.

3.3. Efficient Online Meetings - How It Works

Taking all the above-stated factors into account, it is easy to understand that we cannot simply imitate offline activities, but may need to think outside the box and create new and exciting online activities.

For online meetings, the following rules should be followed:

- A moderator is needed to lead through the meeting confidently and with minimal error. Facilitators must have the necessary know-how for using online meeting tools.
- Participants with little experience must be helped - already in advance by e.g. entering the system 15 minutes beforehand
- Facilitation plan, which is hardly different in structure from an offline meeting, helps to structure the meeting.
- The moderation cycle is always the same - introduction and onboarding, content design, conclusion and offboarding.
- Introduce rules on how to communicate. These can be:
    - mute when not speaking
    - raise your hand when you want to say something
    - respond with emojis when the speaker asks something

- Work with the video camera at least at the beginning so that people can see each other in person, and ideally - if the lines are good - during the entire meeting.
- Just like an offline meeting, there needs to be a variety of methods during the online meeting, such as icebreakers, physical exercise, voting, working in small groups, presenting results etc. Please take into account: There are many useful tools (whiteboards, quizzes, etc.) to visualise the process or the results. The motto should be: Less is more. As people usually only work with one screen, it is difficult to follow if too many different tools are used. Ideally, all the tools used should be integrated into the video conferencing tool (e.g. via a common screen) and not shared via links, as there is always someone who cannot follow and is overwhelmed.
- Online meetings need to be well prepared - especially if different tools are used.
- Online, we cannot concentrate for the same amount of time in as in offline. Our brain is constantly receiving more input. Meetings therefore need to be scheduled shorter (45 minutes as a school lesson is ideal). Do not forget breaks
- Don't forget time for exchanges, chats at the start.
- The moderator is the first to be online and the last to be offline.

4. Dissemination of information

A large part already takes place digitally. In order to coordinate processes and enable cooperation, all activities and offers that promote the dissemination of information and the transfer of knowledge are combined. Digital knowledge transfer has many advantages but also disadvantages. The advantages outweigh the disadvantages if personal communication skills are not neglected.

4.1. Potentials of Information Dissemination

Digitalisation also brings advantages – certain type of work only needs to be done once (e.g. creating a group) and with one click information goes out to everyone - it can be planned well in advance - with good communication planning, the digitalisation of knowledge transfer is a great benefit.

Advantages:
- digital transmission of information reduces the need for personal coordination
- prevents misinformation
- information can be passed on to everyone at the same time
- saves valuable time

4.2. Challenges of Information Dissemination

In the case of direct communication, facial expressions say a lot about whether people are reading and understanding the materials provided to them. In the case of digital transmission, this feedback or confirmation is lacking.

Disadvantages:
- information overload - technostress is caused in everyday situations where new technical devices or systems overwhelm the user
- direct in-person communication suffers from digitalisation and also leads to frequent misunderstandings
- When conducting seminars and trainings, social contact is missing and existing concepts have to be completely transformed
- the dissemination of the results achieved online does not facilitate the testing of some products as easily
- the online participation of various people interested in the results you achieve will not facilitate the creation of lasting interpersonal bonds.

4.3. Efficient Information Dissemination - How it works

The most important thing is clarification of tasks and objectives for each member of the team, as well as ensuring access to different information channels and the universal team involvement in the process of change.

A good digital information transfer is possible via:

- information on the homepage
- use of messaging tools: staff can exchange information without delay
- regular e-mail communication (newsletters...)
- use of video conferencing software that allows for low internet bandwidth so as not to exclude anyone
- intranet or cloud solution with easy access to knowledge, such as training materials, documents, etc.
- social media: closed groups in social media, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, have also proven their worth in professional practice

5. Case Studies

In the following, we have compiled some best practice for the emergence of new services as a result of the transformation process from offline to online mode.

Reading sponsorships

In Lockdown, the TV room in the long-term care home was used so that the reading mentor could continue to offer the reading program from home via a video conferencing tool. Previously, the schedule was a whole afternoon every month - digitally, the reading takes place once a week and only for an hour and a half. It is well received by the residents.

Crochet round of the pensioners

In the Villacher community centers, organised by the pensioners' associations, topic-related meetings take place (bowling circle, discussion circle, handicraft circle). The crochet circle has joined together in lockdown to form a WhatsApp group and the ladies now each crochet at home and are connected via the video tool. In the beginning it was moderated, but now the ladies organise it themselves. But they are also always happy to meet face to face.

SugarBabes meeting

Sugar babes is a recurring meeting for children with type 1 diabetes, their relatives, teachers and the wider community. At these meetings there is always professional input as well as exchange and networking opportunities. The SugarBabes-meeting planned for March 2020 has been moved to the digital world. Due to the respective distractions in the families, it was not possible to keep to the agenda - there was a lack of childcare (compared to the face-to-face-meetings). Everyone agreed to send the questions directly to the organisers and then to get the respective answers from the professional responsible peoples/offices and to offer the digital meetings only for the patients in the different age groups (8+).

Volunteer Picnic

The participants of the 1st Carinthian Volunteer Picnic discussed whether a digital volunteer picnic should be organised in the fall of 2020. In principle, everyone was in favour of it, but when it came to the implementation, when individual associations were supposed to provide presentation videos, this attempt failed. It was agreed to offer a hybrid solution in 2023.
Reason: the clubs apparently need guidance and support in developing the content and implementation (which digitally no one wanted to admit).