
Supporting Volunteer Activities with Mobile Social Software

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Abstract

Many community organizations rely extensively on volunteer work. However, people who wish to help often have difficulties finding the time to volunteer. We are developing mobile social software that is intended to motivate users to volunteer and to help users find volunteering opportunities. In order to understand how technology might support volunteering, we interviewed 9 recent volunteers about their volunteer work. We report on their motivations to volunteer, obstacles to volunteering, and strategies they use to manage the demands of volunteering. We discuss how these factors are shaping the design of a mobile social application to support volunteering.

Keywords

Mobile devices, volunteering, mobile social software

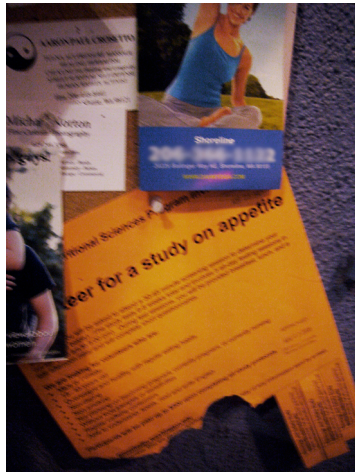
ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3. Group and Organization Interfaces: Computer-supported cooperative work; K.4.m. Social Issues: Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Many organizations around the world rely upon volunteer work to achieve their goals, from small community centers to international service organizations. These organizations often promote broader societal goals such as reducing hunger and

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homelessness, providing educational services, improving animal welfare or environmental health, and assisting individuals in times of illness. Although most people recognize the importance of supporting these organizations, many people find it difficult to get started volunteering and to maintain volunteer activities. A recent study [4] revealed that the national volunteering rate in the United States is approximately 26%, and that among those, approximately one-third of volunteers do not continue their volunteering activities beyond the first year.

If we wish to improve the volunteering rate, we must understand the factors that separate volunteers from non-volunteers. A national survey [5] found that active volunteers have as many work and family obligations as non-volunteers, but organize their lives to include volunteering activities. Thus, with proper motivation and opportunity, many people who do not currently volunteer could find the time to support causes that they care for. We believe that mobile technology can extend traditional volunteer recruitment strategies (Fig. 1) by making individuals more aware of opportunities to volunteer within their community, connecting these individuals to friends with similar goals, and providing motivation to continue volunteering over time.

In what follows, we report on interviews with 9 active volunteers that explored their motivations to volunteer, obstacles that they encountered in volunteering, and strategies that they used to manage the demands of volunteering. Based on the results of these interviews, we suggest opportunities for developing technology to support volunteering. We then describe our current progress on developing a mobile social application to support volunteering, and our planned next steps.

Related Work

Many organizations that work with volunteers already use information technology to support their activities. Service organizations such as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps maintain extensive web sites, and many community organizations maintain lists of open volunteer positions on their web sites. Organizations may also use email newsletters or text messages to maintain contact with interested individuals and former volunteers. Some groups have also begun to use social networking sites such as Facebook to organize events, such as with the recent protests against California's marriage rights law, Proposition 8 [9].

While sometimes effective, these methods do not always meet the needs of potential volunteers. First, a person must explicitly find a web site or read through a newsletter to find volunteer opportunities. Second, that person may need to take additional steps to find out more about the opportunity, such as contacting a volunteer coordinator. Finally, these methods are primarily useful when finding a volunteering opportunity, and provide relatively little support for maintaining volunteer activities.

In contrast, mobile social applications offer several unique features that make them a potentially powerful means of promoting volunteer activity in integrated, unobtrusive ways. First, because mobile devices are usually carried throughout the day, they have the potential to intervene at the ideal moment, based on the user's location, activity, or routines [6]. For example, a system might notify a user of an after-school reading program that meets at the library along the route that she walks home. The same system might ask another user to purchase pet food for the local

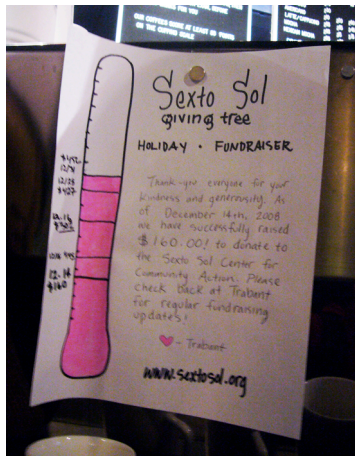


figure 1. Paper signs in a café are used to recruit volunteers for a research study (top) and show the progress of a fund drive (bottom).

animal shelter while that user is shopping at the supermarket. This could improve interactions between users and potential volunteering opportunities by reducing the amount of effort needed to contribute.

Second, mobile devices are capable of tracking the user's activities, and can provide helpful and motivating feedback. This is exemplified by systems such as UbiFit Garden [3] and UbiGreen [7], which track users' activities over time, and present progress toward a goal using a mobile glanceable display. This approach could be generalized to support a range of volunteer activities. The user could track their progress on volunteer tasks as they perform them, and receive real-time feedback about their impact.

Finally, the connected nature of most mobile devices could enable users to share their goals and progress with friends, family, and peers. This peer feedback can act to motivate users, and has been used in prior studies to encourage physical activity [2] and "green" behavior [8]. Pollenteering Network [1] is a design prototype that provides basic support for sharing volunteer opportunities between neighbors. Combining this social feedback with activity tracking and opportunistic notification could create a powerful tool for motivating and supporting volunteer activities.

User Study

Although prior work provides a foundation for mobile applications that support volunteering, developing such applications is not straightforward. To be successful, this application must provide appropriate, useful, and actionable information without overwhelming the user. To understand how volunteering opportunities can be integrated into a user's daily life, we interviewed 9

recent volunteers (6 female, 3 male). Our informants ranged in age from 27 to 49, and each had volunteered for at least one organization in the last two years. Our informants had volunteered for a wide variety of organizations, including childcare, crisis support, organic farming, and hospice care.

We asked informants to describe their recent volunteer work. We also asked informants how they found out about volunteering opportunities, whether they encouraged others to participate in volunteer activities, and whether they had experienced difficulties in their volunteering work. Finally, we asked informants to consider how technology might help in finding and pursuing volunteer opportunities. Here we present the major themes that emerged during our interviews, as well as their implications for developing technology to support volunteering.

Choosing volunteer activities

Informants used a variety of methods to choose volunteer activities. Often, informants chose to volunteer for specific causes, sometimes for personal reasons. One informant volunteered in hospice care after a family member benefited from that service. Another informant, who was a cancer survivor, regularly volunteered for a support line for cancer patients. This informant attributed her interest in volunteering to her experience with cancer, and said, "It's created my career path [and] my volunteer work."

Other informants chose volunteer opportunities that allowed them to develop new skills, or to practice skills that they already had. Informants mentioned that choosing volunteer work to match their skills was often easier for them, provided useful experience to include

on their résumé, and maximized the impact of their work.

Technology that matches a volunteer with jobs relevant to their interests or skills would increase the likelihood that the volunteer will be interested in the job, and may increase the likelihood that the volunteer has relevant experience. A mobile application might therefore ask a user to complete a volunteer profile, or might learn a user's preferences based on past volunteer work.

Showing impact

Most informants were concerned about the impact of their volunteer work. Informants fondly described incidents where they felt that they made an impact in an individual's life. In some cases, informants quit a volunteer job when they felt that their work was not helpful. Thus, giving volunteers positive feedback about the impact of their work will motivate them to continue.

There are multiple ways in which technology can provide feedback about the impact of volunteer work. A mobile device application might be used to set goals and display progress toward them. An application might also provide feedback about peers' activities, or show information about the beneficial effects of the work. For example, the micro-lending site Kiva¹ allows users to lend money to entrepreneurs in developing countries, and provides donors with regular journal updates from the entrepreneurs.

Minimizing time and distance costs

The most common reason that informants provided for not volunteering, or for not volunteering more, was lack

of time. Our informants often volunteered during downtime, such as between jobs or during school breaks. Informants often stopped or reduced their volunteering activity once they resumed work or school, or if they moved away from the volunteering location.

Our informants used a variety of strategies to make time to volunteer. A few informants were able to set aside a specific day of the week for volunteering. Others minimized commute times by volunteering at their place of work or a nearby location. For example, one informant who was a teacher founded a chess club that met at his school after school hours. Other informants minimized time costs by performing tasks at home. For example, an informant who volunteered for a cancer support service answered calls that were redirected to her home phone.

Technology can decrease costs to volunteers in several ways. A mobile device might notify a potential volunteer about a volunteering opportunity near her home, workplace, or along her commute route. In some cases, a system might assign tasks that can be performed over the phone or over the Internet to users who could not otherwise participate. Finally, it is important to recognize that while not everyone is capable of giving time to volunteer, some people may be willing to give in other ways. These people can be encouraged to donate money, donate personal items, or make phone calls, and should receive positive feedback and support for this work. One informant said, "[I will] contribute 25 dollars a month ... I won't necessarily stand on a street corner with them, but I'll send them money every month."

¹ <http://www.kiva.org>

Leveraging social connections

Our informants found social connections to be a strong motivation to volunteer. A number of informants started a volunteer activity because a friend or family member was already involved. Visiting this friend was often a primary reason for volunteering. Others described how they “dragged along” friends and family to help with volunteer activities. Over time, informants would often form connections with their fellow volunteers, which led to other volunteering activities later on. In particular, volunteers with a specific skill, such as web design, were often re-recruited by an organization with which they had previously worked.

Technology that allows users to share information about their volunteering activities with friends may encourage others to get involved. Tracking users’ skills and prior experience might also help them connect with organizations that can use their expertise.

Recognizing and rewarding work

When asked to describe why they volunteered, a number of informants described the extrinsic benefits of volunteering. The most frequently mentioned benefit was the ability to include volunteer experience on résumés or job applications. However, informants also mentioned other benefits, such as free entry to events, food, or transportation to and from the volunteering location. These reasons were often described as “selfish,” but were important to some informants.

Although we are hesitant to introduce payment for volunteer work, these incidental benefits did motivate some of our informants to volunteer. Software that helps users find volunteer opportunities could motivate some potential volunteers by making these benefits

more visible. Furthermore, a system that maintained an electronic record of volunteering activities would be beneficial to those users who wished to share their volunteering experience with potential employers. Finally, several informants mentioned that they appreciated these rewards in part because they showed that a volunteer organization appreciated their contribution. Providing other methods for organizations to send thank you messages or other feedback to volunteers might provide similar benefits with lower costs.

Avoiding information overload

Most of our informants mentioned using the web and email to track potential volunteering activities. However, some informants mentioned feeling overwhelmed by newsletters or invitations to volunteering activities. In some cases, informants also found it difficult to unsubscribe from newsletters or decline requests to volunteer.

Mobile software that is intended to support volunteering must therefore present information appropriately. For most people, volunteering is not an everyday activity, and presenting too much information may cause many people to ignore further requests. Such software should therefore provide notifications that effectively alert the user to relevant opportunities, but which are also easy to ignore.

Future Work

We are currently developing a mobile social application that will help connect individuals to relevant volunteering opportunities, and that will help volunteer organizations work with these potential volunteers. This application will focus on three primary features:

1) notifying users of relevant volunteering opportunities; 2) enabling users to share information about volunteering activities with peers; and 3) providing feedback to users about their progress toward individual and group goals. Our designs are influenced by physical artifacts and signs used to advertise volunteer opportunities and recruit potential volunteers, such as those in Figure 1. We plan to evaluate this prototype with active volunteers, potential volunteers, and volunteer organizers.

In addition, we will continue our interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of how this technology might be integrated into the practices of volunteers and service organizations. In particular we intend to talk with volunteer organizers and to people who are interested in volunteering, but have not yet started.

Finally, although we have focused on volunteering in this paper, we are developing this technology with the intent of supporting a wide range of activities that a group performs over a period of time. This could include volunteering efforts managed by an official volunteer organization, or more informal activities planned by individuals, groups, families, or neighbors. For example, a group of neighbors might decide to clean up the street trash in their neighborhood. Our software will enable users to set this goal as a group, record progress toward this goal, and invite others to work toward this goal. We expect that this technology will enable end-users to set individual and group goals and monitor their progress toward these goals.

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