

Prepared by Steve Harris, May 2016

1. Introduction

This fairly informal paper is about the design of websites intended to bring volunteers and charities¹ together. A well-known example website of this type is www.do-it.org.

We have discovered some important ways of increasing applications from volunteers.

This paper is derived from experiments and measurements on our website. It is not a rigorous or exhaustive examination of the subject and almost certainly contains some errors and poorly tested theory.

It is intended to inspire further work and discussion.

2. Why are volunteer broking websites important?

In many parts of the country – especially urban areas, websites are a major way in which people looking for volunteering opportunities find charities to approach. As a volunteer brokerage service we have been long term users of www.do-it.org.uk and its successor www.do-it.org

3. What's the problem?

We and our peers have not found these sites very satisfactory in a number of ways. The latest incarnation of www.do-it.org doesn't support many of the backroom functions we needed. Also, both volunteers and recruiters reported difficulties with the site.

Just one example is that opportunities that are available anywhere within an area (as opposed to at a fixed point) are often missing from search results.

4. What did we do?

On 5 January 2016 we launched a new search facility on our Volunteering Gloucestershire site. It differed from www.do-it.org and rivals in that it focussed on the potential volunteer's passions and

¹ We use "charities as a shorthand for "charities, voluntary and community organisations, etc.

circumstances and downplayed geography. It then forwards the searcher on to the right part of the standard www.do-it.org site for more detail and processing of an application to do the role.

5. What did we find?

Applications to charities rose by 76% over the first 4 months even though site visits are slightly down. This improvement was much greater than expected.

After some investigation of Google Analytics for the site we have tentatively identified two significant reasons for the increase.

- As intended, our new Search facility helped people find suitable opportunities. Around 20% of the traffic to pages just before transfer to www.do-it.org came from it.
- Completely unexpectedly, around 75% of the traffic to pages just before transfer to www.do-it.org came from Google or Bing without using our Search.

More details of the users' journey

Source	%
Google	68.35%
Bing	7.11%
From our menu	18.82%
Others	5.72%

(Our Search page is at www.volunteerglos.org.uk/search.php and an example of our “transfer” pages is at www.volunteerglos.org.uk/s_Animals.php)

6. Discussion

- Earlier in 2015 we had wondered if a dedicated search engine was even necessary and conducted some experiments submitting customised searches to Google. This exercise revealed that Google didn't easily find individual opportunities on www.do-it.org. This may be because of the complex way in which their pages are assembled. (They are a long way from being simple HTML)
- Our “transfer” pages are found by Google and used by volunteers to reach www.do-it.org opportunities. Our pages are simple listing of types of opportunities made from fairly simple HTML
- **It seems likely that the main reason for our success is that our “transfer” pages had (unintentionally) facilitated Google users to find relevant pages on www.do-it.org**

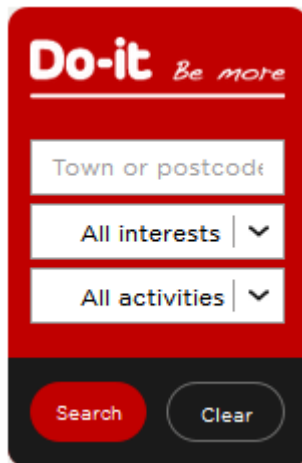
7. Conclusions and Suggestions for future work

- www.do-it.org doesn't “work” for all the volunteers out there looking for opportunities
- It's worth adding an alternative search route to “capture” more volunteers

- However, it would be unwise to drop DO It or another successful route.
- www.do-it.org might investigate if changes to their pages might get more Google hits
- Our Volunteer Centre peers might usefully experiment with pages similar to our transfer pages

Appendix: The design of our site

Previously we had used a search box linked directly to the national Do It site at www.do-it.org `



Our concerns with this site (and some of its rivals) included

1. Asking the volunteer to think about location first
2. Opportunities that happen at other than a fixed point are not handled well
3. The selection of interests and activities being somewhat bland
4. A tendency to find a very small or very large number of results

When designing our site we decided:

1. To focus first on the volunteers passions and desired activities
2. Slightly de-emphasise location issues²
3. To continue to use www.do-it.org to host opportunity descriptions and the application system.
4. To continue to capture Do It's natural traffic – and generate our own
5. Build a more effective search “on top of” Do It

² However we did improve the handling of opportunities that happened in an area rather than a fixed point. Our “rule” for area opportunities was just to select items for pages based on the place **names** used by www.do-it.org without reference to geographic coordinates. EG: An opportunity on www.do-it.org with Region=Cheltenham would be selected and identified as being “Cheltenham”

The first thing a user of the new site sees is this slightly old-fashioned menu

WHAT I CARE ABOUT	WHAT I WANT TO DO	I'M INTERESTED IN	PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES
People issues	Children & Young People		
Animals	People		
Environment & Conservation	Addiction		
	Disability		
	Mental health		
	Poverty, Homeless, etc.		
	Older people		
	Women & Girls		

On clicking one of the choices, a listing of opportunities is displayed. If there are 30 or less, a simple county-wide listing is shown (Such pages are referred to as “transfer” pages above)

Museums and Heritage

Hover over entries to preview, click for more details and to apply.

Education Volunteer	Gloucester
Events Volunteer	Gloucester
Explorers education volunteer	Saul
Front of House Stewards	Tewkesbury
Learning Assistant	Berkeley
Minibus & Car Park	Woodchester
Museum Visitor Assistants	Stroud
Office Manager	Brockworth
Old Baptist Chapel Volunteer Guides	Tewkesbury
Practical Volunteers	Gloucestershire
Tea room & Kitchen volunteer	Woodchester
Trip Boat Crew & Bankside Volunteers	Lechlade
Visitor Reception Assistant	Berkeley
Visitor Reception Assistant	Berkeley
Visitor Services Volunteer	Cheltenham
Volunteer Collections Assistant	Berkeley
Welcomer / Guide	Gloucester

This relies on the user's **eyes** to filter by location. If there are more than 30 results, a tabbed page is displayed: EG:

Volunteer work with people living with Disability

Hover over entries to preview, click for more details and to apply.

Cheltenham **Gloucester** **Outside Cheltenham / Gloucester**

Activities Assistant	Gloucester
Activity Day Centre Volunteers	Gloucester
Association Visitor	Gloucestershire
Befriend someone with learning difficulties and improve their social life	Gloucestershire
Befriender	Gloucestershire
Buddy	Gloucestershire
Carnival Kings and Queens - Art Shape	Gloucester
Committee Member	Quedgeley
Conversation Partner Scheme	Gloucestershire
Event Organisers	Gloucester
Gloucester Hospital Ambassador	Gloucester
Home Visitor	Gloucestershire
IT Specialist and Online Support	Gloucestershire
Mix and Mash Music Week with The Music Works	Gloucester
Of Course We Can	Gloucestershire
Secretary	Quedgeley
Singing Group Helper	Gloucestershire
Support Worker	Gloucester

A nice feature is the ability to hover over an entry to get a short preview of the opportunity

Hover over entries to preview, click for more details and to apply.

Cheltenham

Gloucester

Outside Cheltenham / Gloucester

Appropriate Adult

Quedgeley

Assistant Youth

CCP's Appropriate Adults scheme provides trained volunteers who act as Appropriate Adults to 10 - 16 year olds whose parents cannot, or will not, attend whilst their children are held in Police custody. The scheme is also available to adults with...

Assistant Youth

Assistant Youth Leader with 19th Gloucester Brownies

Longlevens