

Take Volunteer Software Seriously

If you work with volunteers, you need to understand these five essential software lessons.

By Anna Murray

Volunteers are unique users of software. When you work with them, it's critical to understand their needs and the ways they interact with software systems. Here are some lessons for nonprofits leveraging software used by volunteers.

1. "The volunteer experience has to be quick, easy, and delightful."

This quote comes from a client of mine, and I absolutely love it. Feels like a high bar for software? Sure. But volunteer engagement is critical to the mission of almost every nonprofit. One way to turn off volunteers is to neglect their needs in a software system.

Whether it's scheduling, updating information, or reporting, volunteers must be able to get in, do their work, and get out quickly and painlessly.

2. Prepare for the wee hours.

Software usage in the middle of the night is prevalent among nonprofit volunteers. They're more likely than any other user group to be logging into systems and working from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m.

This pattern affects things like software patches, which developers often schedule in the wee hours. Taking a system offline at midnight may be a good idea in a standard business environment, but for volunteers, it may interrupt their prime work hours.

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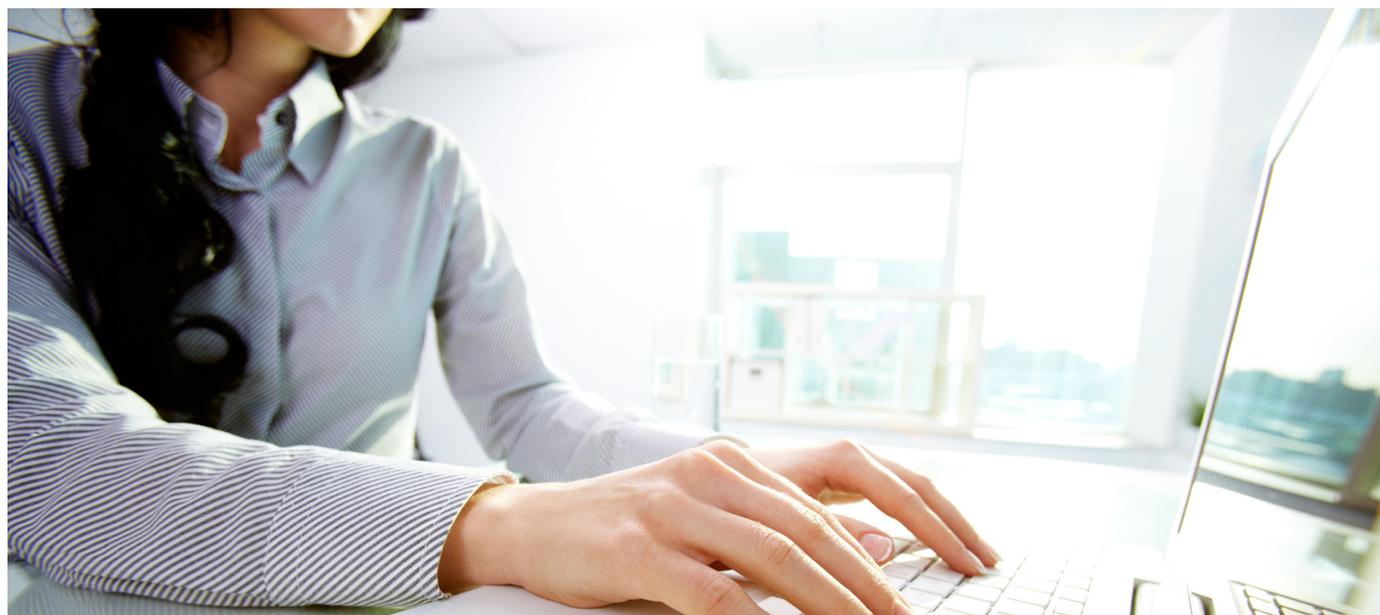
Seasonality is a related concept. Many nonprofits have a hot season, around an event like a walkathon or benefit dinner. Affected here are things like system load, onboarding, and licensing structures. If your organization works with volunteers, keep all these factors in mind.

3. Provide training.

Most volunteers cycle in and out of their roles. This turnover creates a whole host of impacts on software.

Make sure you have a process in place to bring new volunteers up to speed on your software systems. With volunteers constantly entering and leaving, low-touch software training is essential. Software vendors may provide resources, but often an organization's software is so customized that generic resources aren't sufficient.

One great tactic to employ is software-training webinars in which you walk the audience through the software's key functions. Those webinars can be recorded and made accessible to future volunteers.



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Better yet, develop a library of short (three to five minutes) YouTube training videos. And remember to put links to these resources in e-mails and on websites where volunteers can find them in the middle of the night.

4. Have good offboarding.

Another area impacted by volunteer turnover is the exit process. Be sure you have a flow in place for when a volunteer leaves.

Let's say you have a volunteer in charge of a function, and that person leaves. The new volunteer needs to manage the same data set. But the old volunteer still holds the username and password on the account.

One thing that often happens at this point is that the outgoing volunteer shares her username and password with the new volunteer. This is an insecure practice because many people (unfortunately) use the same password for other accounts. Your software needs an admin-level process to retire accounts and grant access to new volunteers.

5. Consider mobile usage and responsive design.

In addition to logging on in the middle of the night, volunteers may also be working on the sideline of their child's soccer game. Providing a responsive site or mobile app shows that you respect your volunteers' efforts to find bits of time to be productive. 

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