Helping others while helping yourself: Persons with disabilities as UN Online Volunteers

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Every year, around 12,000 UN Online Volunteers team up with hundreds of organizations to
address sustainable development challenges anywhere in the world.

The UNV Online Volunteering service enables people around the globe to find opportunities posted by civil society organizations, public institutions and UN agencies. By supporting these organizations, volunteers develop their skills and become part of a global online community of peers, sharing the goal of advancing human development.

Today, the United Nations marks the International Day of Persons with Disabilities and 10 years since the adoption of its landmark Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Both the Day and the Convention stress the importance for persons with disabilities to participate in society on an equal basis with everyone else, and the need to remove barriers to their inclusion.

The UNV Online Volunteering service does just that. By providing persons with disabilities with opportunities to volunteer online, major barriers to their inclusion are overcome. While a physical disability may limit person’s mobility or dexterity, there is plenty of evidence to show that people with physical disabilities can fully engage in meaningful activities.

The UNV Online Volunteering service provides opportunities that allow persons with disabilities to volunteer their strengths, abilities and skills from the comfort of their own home, and make a tremendous impact on the lives of others as well as their own.

As Shana Ogren Lourey, who was hurt in a car accident while serving in the Peace Corps in Malawi, put it, “Online volunteering has helped to challenge and interest me in our world, even when I am physically further away from certain parts of life because of my brain injury. It makes me feel useful.” She is now a UN Online Volunteer for the Saratoga Foundation for Women Worldwide, a non-profit that performs research and analysis on the socioeconomic condition of women and girls.

There are millions of reasons why persons with disabilities decide to take the initiative and volunteer online. Jaber Esfandi is an Iranian lawyer who has performed legal research and case analysis as a UN Online Volunteer, mostly because “I am a disabled person coming from a poor family, and I wanted to help others in the same situation.” Jaber firmly believes that people with disabilities should try to be present in the society and fight for their rights as equal citizens.

Volunteering online makes people happier. Racquel Sarah A. Castro, who has a Bachelor’s Degree in Information Technology, volunteered online to improve the website of a Kenyan NGO devoted to promoting and protecting children’s rights. “It changes my perspective that I can help children even though I am miles away from them. It’s a great experience and our responsibility to help the world that perceives us to be different.” To fulfill this goal, she continues, “the UN gives us a great opportunity. You must grab it because it will definitely change the way you think. It will give you the self-worth you are longing to have.”
Along with Shana, Jaber and Racquel, hundreds of persons with disabilities are mobilized as UN Online Volunteers every year, and there are also a number of organizations that benefit from the system while bringing direct support to this segment of the population.

Nathan Ebanks Foundation is a non-profit that brings support to children with disabilities in Jamaica. When Christine Staple-Ebanks, Founder and President, decided to set up this organization, she did not have the capacities to hire the experts needed, but a friend pointed her to the UNV Online Volunteering service.

Since then, the organization has worked with teams of more than 30 volunteers across several projects. In October 2015, a team of UN Online Volunteers supported the Foundation to organize a conference whose major outcome was the development of Jamaica’s first statement on inclusion, which is now being widely used in policy documents across governmental agencies.

Christine told us that she would not have been able to achieve the level of development and organizational strengthening had it not been for the support provided by the UNV Online Volunteering service.

The UNV Online Volunteering service is, by nature, inclusive. Anyone, anywhere, can help. Online Volunteering provides people ready to commit their energy and time for the well-being of others with an extraordinary opportunity to put their skills to work via the Internet. Many options are available for those who are motivated to make the world a better place. The focus is never on people’s disabilities. It’s on our abilities.

• Online Volunteering • Persons with disabilities

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth, SDG 10: Reduced inequalities, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals