

Technology and Volunteer Driver Programs

HIGHLIGHTS

Technology

- General
- Internet
- Automation

Software

- Ride scheduling
- Data management
- Payment for rides
- GPS

Communication

- E-mail
- Land line phones
- Cell phones
- E-mail and cell

BACKGROUND

Today, there are hundreds and possibly thousands of volunteer driver programs in the United States. Some are small with perhaps one or two paid staff and a few volunteer drivers who provide rides to a small number of passengers. Others have a large staff and hundreds of volunteer drivers and passengers. In their early days, most volunteer driver programs arranged their rides via telephone and managed their data via pad and pen. Through the years, most have embraced the world of technology with respect to their daily operations, data management, and communication with the outside world.

INFORMATION GATHERING METHOD

In 2016, the National Volunteer Transportation Center asked the STAR Awards applicants to identify the top three ways technology impacts their volunteer driver programs. The 147 volunteer driver program managers who responded to the request provided some concerns about technology. However, they also identified almost 500 examples of their use of automation, the internet, cloud-based communication, and software for scheduling, dispatch, and management.

The NVTC made the application available to volunteer driver programs on Survey Monkey.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please visit the numerous fact sheets and exercises in addition to the planning, implementation, and evaluation sections of the TurnKey Kit.

CAVEATS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY USE

Some applicants said they had not experienced the “technology bug” or that technology had no bearing on their programs. Others commented that technology needs to be supported by humans and although their volunteer drivers were happy with technology, they also wanted human contact. Still others commented that their passengers (and many of their drivers) were of an age where the only technology they used was a cell phone, and many were not e-mail users. One program manager who was enthusiastic about technology put it this way:

“We believe in the human touch to maintain our record keeping, and our communication with volunteers, care receivers, and community partners.”

AUTOMATION

A few STAR Awards applicants mentioned that technology had resulted in “something new” for their program.

- “We streamlined our invoicing systems and can now receive online payments.”
- “We are now able to maintain an accurate database of clients and volunteers.”
- “We now use a cloud-based program to document our client services.”
- “Our monthly ride schedule is now sent by e-mail.”
- “Volunteer drivers may now confirm ride selections online.”
- “Volunteers are now able to track their mileage online.”
- “We acquired three computers and moved from a totally manual system to an automated system.”

THE INTERNET

Applicants identified numerous uses of the internet and most of them said technology had changed their methods of operation. Following are a few examples:

- E-verify online background checks
- Internet to send volunteers their ride information and to communicate
- Volunteer Match’s website as a source of recruitment
- Use by healthcare providers to request rides directly through a link on their intranet
- Internet searches for referral services
- Online sign up for new volunteer drivers
- Online applications that volunteer drivers can complete and submit
- Use of online webinars for training
- The ability to maintain countywide information about multiple ride services
- Online information and referral using program software platform
- Ability of riders to request transportation needs and provide feedback online

SOFTWARE

Many applicants were optimistic about purchasing and using software.

"We are preparing to purchase software that will help remove most of the intensive manual methods of gathering information pertaining to the individual or destination. It will also enable drivers with internet access to view rides needed on the days they are available as well as assign themselves to the ride. As they select a ride they also will receive an automated email with the pertinent information surrounding the trip!"

Volunteer driver programs that used software described it as a key to improved efficiency and effectiveness. Examples of their responses include:

- "Technology training is (especially on software) part of the volunteer training program, and makes the volunteer orientation more comprehensive."
- "We use spreadsheet/databases to track volunteer recruitment and placement."
- "We now use mapping software that makes providing rides easier for us and for drivers."
- "We are now able to create an electronic daily schedule."
- "The use of navigation apps on smart phones have simplified driving and navigating for volunteers."

SOFTWARE FOR SCHEDULING, DISPATCH, AND DATA MANAGEMENT

Applicants also identified numerous ways their software impacted positively on their program by making it possible for them:

- to capture detailed information about volunteers and clients/customers
- to track needs for rides, passengers served, mileage, trips, hours, etc.
- to create trip itineraries, track completed miles, hours, and services
- to easily capture detailed information for volunteers and passengers served
- to quickly and efficiently schedule and assign ride requests
- to better manage the business by scheduling electronically, by maintaining electronic records, and easily analyzing data

At the same time, applicants said it was possible for volunteer drivers to participate in ride scheduling and data management. Some features also enabled them:

- to report their mileage and number of rides more easily
- to log their time electronically
- to efficiently share in completing the daily manifest of one-way rides
- to log in and sign up for upcoming transports

The ability of volunteer drivers to self-assign rides was the feature mentioned most often as an enhancement for managing volunteer driver programs.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Cloud-based systems, program websites, social media, e-mail and text messaging, cell phones and beepers were identified as improving program communication. One respondent commented about his use of technology in saying: "Cell phones, cell phones, cell phones." Below are examples of responses from other applicants.

- "Social media is used for volunteer awareness and recruitment."
- "We recruit volunteers on Facebook."
- "Our new, improved website is good for promoting our program and attracting volunteers."
- "We use cell phones and e-mail to reach volunteers and clients."
- "I text my volunteer driver assignments."
- "We promote program awareness through our agency Twitter account."
- "We can now use social media to recruit volunteers and care receivers."
- "Clients and volunteers find our services on our website."
- "Some of our clients are scheduling their rides by e-mail."
- "GPS enables volunteers to find the homes of clients and the trip destinations."
- "Many of our drivers use Mapquest."
- "Our program uses a cloud-based calendar so staff in two offices can schedule rides and have access to the schedule."
- "Automated text reminders to volunteers results in no missed assignments."

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

As we saw earlier, not all volunteer driver program applicants were believers in the efficacy of technology. However, the majority of programs not only experienced positive outcomes from using technology, the comment below suggests that many of them had anticipated it in advance.

"As we transition to a mobile platform, technology will allow us to upgrade our dispatch program so that our volunteer drivers will be able to self-select the rides they choose to deliver, reducing the time dispatch must spend to recruit for individual rides, and cutting down on the number of e-mails between the dispatcher and drivers. With this new technology, once a volunteer selects a ride, a manifest containing individualized instructions for the rider will be e-mailed automatically, allowing the organization to deliver rides more efficiently, especially during nonbusiness hours, holidays, and weekends."

Although some outcomes were included in earlier topics, what follows on the next page are numerous outcomes that were identified, resulting in important changes in the management and operations of volunteer driver programs.

ACTUAL OUTCOMES

It is clear from the information provided by volunteer driver programs, that technology was expected to have (and had) a huge impact on ride scheduling and data management, on communication and outreach, on volunteer and passenger recruitment, and on raising awareness about their services and support. Below are ten words used most frequently to describe its impact:

- efficiency
- effectiveness
- accuracy
- timeliness
- convenience
- improved
- coordination
- simplification
- accessibility
- flexibility

The comments below provide a broad range of the types of outcomes and related contributions of technology to volunteer driver programs.

- **“Computers** have brought order to volunteer scheduling.”
- “Our **website** enables us to use social media to raise awareness about our program and recruit volunteer drivers.”
- **“Technology** gives us more ways to contact and connect with volunteers!”
- **“Dispatching software** allows us to quickly and efficiently generate reports and process volunteer driver mileage.”
- **“Web-based scheduling** allows flexibility and transparency.”
- “Our **website** allows for online fundraising and secure online payments.”
- **“Online postings** have made it easier to recruit volunteers.”
- “We use **social media** for volunteer recruitment and volunteer awareness.”
- **“Computers** help us maintain an accurate database.”
- **“Online training** has reduced training time and enabled self-training.”
- **“Ride scheduling** has become easier.”
- **“Texts** improve our ability to update drivers to changes.”
- **“Cell phones** enable us to easily assign rides and contact volunteer drivers.”
- **“Mobile communications** give us improved access to volunteer drivers.”
- “Today, data are more easily accessible to us and our volunteers.”
- “Our **website and Facebook** legitimize us to new customers.”
- “The **internet** makes it easier for volunteers to complete applications online.”
- “Our **Twitter** account gives us greater social media presence.”
- **“GPS** helps us with navigating to passengers’ homes and their destinations.”
- “We use social media to easily network for fundraising events, branding, and community awareness.”
- “Our use of **software** saves us a lot of time.”

“I believe software that enables volunteers to self-assign rides is a really big step forward.”