

*"Let me help. A hundred years or so from now, I believe, a famous novelist will write a classic using that theme. He'll recommend those three words even over *I love you*." - Captain Kirk*

I used to work at the place called the [St. Louis Empowerment Center](#), a recovery drop-in center for people who have lived experience with mental health and/or substance use issues. Initially I was hired to cobble together a small computer lab, which I was able to do for very little money using old donated/scrounged computer parts, free and open source software, and a bit of tenacity. I was pretty proud of it and it felt good to see people using it since many of the people who visit the Empowerment Center are experiencing homelessness or near-homelessness and don't generally have reliable access to computers.

I recruited some volunteers, and we would help people look for jobs and community resources and write résumés and such. A lot of people used the computers to play games and listen to music and for Facebook-related stuff, and sometimes I'd take some flak for this since such activities were ostensibly unproductive, but I felt like it was really important that people be able to do what they wanted to do (within reason) since 1) life is difficult a lot of the time and it's important to have a healthy way to blow off steam; 2) people should be afforded the dignity to make their own choices; and probably most pragmatically 3) it's easiest to learn stuff when you don't think you're learning. Old guys would come in afraid to touch the computers for fear that they accidentally blow them up, and eventually they'd warm up to the idea of playing computer chess or hopping on YouTube, and consequently they'd learn how to use the mouse and keyboard and could eventually move on to doing "important" things.

All people have unique needs and goals and are innately deserving of every opportunity to identify the former in order to actualize the latter. In my experience, when you're trying to help someone, it's really important to meet them where they are and to just be a friend and an equal partner and to determine what they view as success and to help facilitate that and to not be judgmental and to not make them feel like an idiot. This is not super profound and it's probably just a basic tenet of not being a jerk, but I think it's something that maybe gets lost since we don't always have a lot of time for each other and want to solve problems quickly and get frustrated when they aren't.

This is all a really needlessly protracted way of saying that I'm working to create a non-profit with the intent of serving as a supplement to existing social service programs by providing individualized support for people who need assistance strengthening skills relating to technological proficiency and/or in pursuit of vocational and community resource goals. My hope is to do this by fostering bases of in-person and remote volunteers who can work with people to help them find whatever it is they're looking for.

In-Person Volunteers

Nowadays I volunteer with the Vocational Services department at [Places for People](#), helping clients write résumés, look for jobs and community resources, and fill out online job applications. The job applications are especially tough for a lot of people since they never learned touch typing and also because many applications are succeeded by excessively long and test anxiety-triggering personality assessments. Some of these assessments are pretty straightforward and it's easy to tell the prospective hirer what you assume they want to hear, but others can be surprisingly mindboggling. I feel like it's helpful for me to be there so that applicants can bounce their thoughts off of me, and I do my best to present an air of calm collectedness. It's always easier to do stuff when you have a friend on hand who can help you do it. I don't think you have to have a lot of special training to help out in this way. People from all walks of life fill out job applications all the time, are good researchers, are able to put people at ease, and possess whatever other requisite skills there might seem to be for a vocational services volunteer.

I think it would be really nice to have a stable of volunteers with different gifts and talents who could travel throughout the area to help people learn skills or find resources or look for jobs or opportunities for greater

self-actualization. These volunteers could individually meet with people at libraries or other public institutions and take as many visits as necessary to help them figure out how to use a mouse, or figure out the best bus route, or figure out something that has to do with Medicare Part B, or figure out how to write a résumé, or figure out where to go for cheap therein lessons, or even figure out who would be best equipped to help figure out these things. Most of the time when people ask me a question, I have no idea what the answer is but I know that I will do whatever I can to find it. Maybe we can create a web of volunteers to act as a [personal learning network](#). Maybe people receiving help from volunteers could one day become full fledged volunteers themselves, and the process could branch out exponentially.

I'd also like to be able to send people to work within existing volunteer frameworks of social service agencies and community organizations. Whenever a social service agency hosts an employment group for its clients, it would be great if we could dispatch volunteers to help out with résumés and job applications on an individual basis after the group has finished meeting. Likewise, when a library hosts basic computer classes, we could dispatch volunteers to help students practice basic skills after each session is over. We could augment services that are already in place and potentially free up social workers and librarians to do other stuff that they need to do.

Remote Volunteers

This past summer, I started sending out a [weekly printable digest](#) of crowdsourced job leads to various job developers to share with clients that don't necessarily have regular access to the internet. I curate jobs listed on various social media pages on which people share leads from billboards, flyers, and word of mouth, and I've come to see that there are lots of relatively obscure and rapidly changing opportunities available - not just opportunities for jobs, but for professional and personal growth as well. I'd like to enlist remote volunteers to assist with this curation effort so that we can create a larger ongoing printable digest of all types of opportunities for the benefit of individuals who are underserved technologically and may not have regular access to social media.

I'd also like to create a means by which certain tasks regarding research or résumé-creation or whatever else could be farmed out to remote volunteers using a digital ticketing system such as those used by customer support departments in for-profit companies. An individual or an agency might request assistance with a small, non-specialized task, a pool of volunteers might see a ticket detailing what this task entails, and one or more of the volunteers might select it and see it to completion.

I'd love to be able to cultivate a non-traditional volunteer base of individuals who, for whatever reason, would not do well in an in-person setting. Perhaps people who have lived experience with issues relating to mobility or social anxiety and have felt excluded from volunteer opportunities in the past.

I don't think that these are crazy ideas, or that they would be especially difficult to implement. Furthermore, I think that they could be accomplished with very little in the way of capital outlay. I don't think that such an organization would ever require a static physical location of its own; on the contrary, I feel that a lack of brick and mortar presence could actually be an intrinsic part of the philosophy of meeting people where they are.

Based on my experience, I know that I could cheaply cobble together a fleet of old (but still perfectly useable) laptops for volunteers to use. I'd love to be able to secure reliable funding for public transit and other modes of transportation in order to ensure that everybody (both volunteers and people with whom they're meeting) can get to wherever they need to go. I'm sure that there are a lot of costs and considerations that I'm not taking into account, but I don't see how there could be anything unsurmountable.

I feel like I could go into greater detail in regard to specifics, but I promised myself that I could keep this to two pages avoid boring people to death, so I'll shut up now. Thanks for reading!