

ASRA Community Event Speech - "Internet Volunteering and the Asian community"

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Zaeem Maqsood and as founder and Chief Executive of eVolunteer, the online volunteer recruitment service, I have been asked to talk a little about volunteering amongst the Asian community. Considering my Internet background, I'd also like to say a few words about the potential role of this new medium in future volunteering efforts.

But first, I'd like to explain a little bit about the organisation I represent. eVolunteer is a global volunteering portal. It is a web-based service designed to be used by community and non-profit groups around the world, free of charge, to advertise voluntary positions. It's a very simple concept, really; just think of it as a free recruitment agency, but dealing only with volunteers and operating purely in cyberspace.

I say it's a simple concept, but until I founded eVolunteer about a year ago, there really wasn't much to speak of on the Internet, in terms of a simple, powerful, international, free, volunteering web site. With my background in Internet programming, I sought to put this right, and after a short while, I introduced eVolunteer.co.uk to the world.

eVolunteer was devised as a commercial venture initially, rather than a 'non-profit'. This was quite deliberate. I had intended eVolunteer to sell a volunteer recruiting service to registered charities, of which there are over 80,000 in the UK alone. But once I started getting feedback from global non-profits about the usefulness of this powerful, free site, I realised that it would be better to keep the service open to all, without charge. After recruiting a couple of friends, eVolunteer was able to offer a professional, though part-time, service to non-profits around the world.

Since then, eVolunteer has grown from strength to strength and has caused quite a stir in volunteering circles. We were featured in the Guardian newspaper recently and were also approached by the Home Office to advise them on the potential of the Internet in volunteering and pro-bono work. We exhibited at the VSO Volunteering World exhibition and were interviewed by the magazine 'Q News'. We now serve over 500 members and organisations around the world, from Mexico, South Africa and India to Barbados, and the Ukraine and we have a growing list hundreds of volunteering positions.

As I said, eVolunteer is a professional though necessarily part-time effort and I think part of what keeps us going as a team is our personal philosophy of volunteering. We have all, at some point, spent time volunteering for various organisations, so we've seen first hand the highs - and the lows - of what it

can involve. We know that non-profits can suffer from a lack of professionalism and sometimes view volunteers as cheap labour. We also know that outside non-profits, volunteering is somewhat stereotyped and aimed at a narrow age range or social group. We make it quite clear on our web site, that we don't agree with these attitudes.

We view volunteering not as a peripheral social activity but as an integral part of a healthy society. We see it as a means towards real personal growth and fulfilment, as a powerful force for positive social change at grassroots level. Volunteering to us is an efficient means of organising a community's resources - as an effective economic system that sits between the Free Market and Government intervention, and is a powerful means of combating excessive materialism, urban alienation and social exclusion.

Volunteering can contribute greatly to strengthening communities. Through selfless sacrifice the confidence of communities can only grow. New levels of trust and respect between community members will flourish as they acquire first hand experience of their neighbours and their problems. I have seen this not only in real world scenarios, but also on the Internet, which hasn't always been the commercial free-for-all you see today. In fact, it would be quite accurate to say that the Internet was built by volunteers. From the early days, the Net has been dominated by what anthropologists call a 'gift-culture' – an environment that promotes gift exchange instead of financial rewards, as a means of allocating resources and rewarding participants. This gift exchange is in the form of volunteering considerable time and effort to develop software for communal use and it's fair to say that in fact today, the internet is not run by big companies like Microsoft, Cisco, Compaq or Intel, as they love to claim, but by free software, developed collaboratively by thousands of programmers working together without financial reward. The Internet is the biggest and most complex engineering project in history, and it was built, and is still run by the efforts of volunteer professionals. Such is the power of volunteering.

The point to this example is that while the Asian community today is fortunate enough to possess some of the most talented and qualified people in the country, they need to be encouraged to participate more in community volunteering. Not only do we have doctors, lawyers and accountants, but engineers, designers, artists, writers, academics and entrepreneurs, many of whom excel in their fields. It is here that I can offer the Internet as more than just an inspiring example, but also as an increasingly important and powerful tool for communities of the future. I have been preaching the virtues of the Internet to non-profits for many years now and the old excuses of cost, effort and complexity that I used to hear simply don't stand up any more. In my experience of both Internet based volunteering and of young Asian attitudes, the Internet is becoming the medium of choice with which to seek out and make contact with community organisations. The reason is clear – if a community organisation bothers to spend time putting information up onto a web site in an effort to reach out, it shows they understand, or are trying to understand, the mindset of young Asians and this can only help capture their interest. After all, if they can buy books and CDs over the Net; if they can chat to strangers on the other side of the world; if they can tap into the most

esoteric knowledge in exquisite detail, then why can't they find out about their own communities?

Of course, once young Asians begin to volunteer, many find it most rewarding. The ability to make a direct and lasting impact on someone's life is a very powerful experience. People need to be given a chance to perform acts of heroism in what is an increasingly spartan spiritual landscape. The postmodern condition of fragmented communities, diverging value systems and cynical reactions to political and social realities demands action on the part of community groups. Not only do the disempowered and underprivileged receive benefit from volunteering, but so does the giver and they stand in a symbiotic relationship that is essential to the health of our communities. Asians, young Asians especially, need to be made aware of this; non-profit groups need to, dare I say, market themselves more effectively. Attention is a scarce commodity these days and non-profits are operating in a competitive environment constructed precisely to distract young people with innumerable opportunities for spending their limited energies.

I'm probably not the most qualified person to chance a gaze at the future of volunteering in our communities, but it seems to me there is clearly a choice. On the one hand, we have a new vista opening up, offering powerful tools and technologies unavailable until only very recently. There are increasing numbers of young, qualified professional Asians who have a lot to offer their communities and are eager for a chance to contribute. On the other hand we have many community organisations still resisting change, wary of a future that demands greater professionalism and organisational talent on their part. Future volunteering will be far more knowledge-based. There is no reason to believe that volunteering is exempt from the forces of change at work in modern societies such as globalisation and rapid technological advance. The volunteers you have today may be working in Africa or Asia tomorrow. By the same token, communities in other parts of the world may be facing the same problems that organisations here have solved and can help with, and indeed, vice versa. In what sense would the community of the future *not* be a virtual community, linked by knowledge and practices, rather than separated by time and space, and how will community groups respond to this? The choice is between a more professional, confident and effective volunteering sector and a reactive, backward looking one. The choice is therefore clear. It of course takes courage to make this choice but I'm confident that volunteering in the Asian community will, as always, meet the challenge and make the right choice.

Thank you