'We Give Our Time' Midterm Report

Background

Volunteer research and focus group results confirm the fact that many volunteers and people who give time to Macmillan would like the opportunity to network and communicate with other volunteers and Macmillan staff/professionals. Whilst some are happy with face-to-face networking, others do not have as much opportunity to enjoy face-to-face contact, for example remote-based volunteers. Others still would actively welcome an online platform as well as face-to-face channels.

Historically, whilst there were a few isolated online networking opportunities for select groups of volunteers, there was no national Macmillan online platform through which volunteers could network and communicate. Likewise, there was no one space that drew relevant materials, documents, tools, and information together for volunteers.

Yet on 13th December 2011, the Volunteering & Community Action Team launched the pilot scheme 'We Give Our Time' – an online networking space aimed at everyone who gives time unpaid to Macmillan. This includes campaigners, Cancer Voices, Self Help & Support Group members, office volunteers and interns, Online Community members, fundraisers, events volunteers and services volunteers.

The aim of the space is to enable people who give their time to Macmillan, or to a Macmillan service, to network and communicate with each other and with relevant Macmillan staff and professionals, as well as making it easy to find relevant information about Macmillan.

The expected outcomes and benefits are that people who give their time to Macmillan feel more part of the Macmillan team (Optimum Volunteering Experience Model Statement 3 as shown below), that they gain a better understanding of Macmillan (Statement 8 below), and that they are encouraged to become more deeply involved with Macmillan.

(9) I receive relevant, clear, informative and consistent communications from Macmillan.

(1) It is easy to get involved as a volunteer with Macmillan.

(2) I can see the impact and difference I make.

(8) I am clear about what Macmillan does & feel reassured that the organisation is going about things in the right way.

The optimum Macmillan volunteering experience...

(3) I feel part of the Macmillan Team.

(7) I am able to progress and develop new skills and experiences.

(4) I feel supported in my role.

(6) My skills are put to good use.

(5) I feel valued and appreciated.

These expected outcomes and benefits will help Macmillan achieve Outcome 8 (I feel part of a community and am inspired to give something back), support our Inspiring Millions Programme, fit well with our Customer Management Programme and further the aims of the Volunteering Experience Project.

Initial findings and trends

The purpose of this midterm report is to give a brief outline of the findings, trends, difficulties and challenges of the first half of the 'We Give Our Time' pilot scheme (13th December 2011 – 6th January 2012). It will be followed up in more detail by the final report in mid February 2012, which will provide an overall evaluation of the pilot scheme.

Uptake

We aimed to identify and recruit a pilot group of approximately 50 – 200 volunteers from Macmillan's current giving-time network to use 'We Give Our Time' by contributing to group discussions, posting information, accessing links, giving news, ideas and suggestions. 70 people expressed an interest in the pilot of the project and were invited to join the online group. They are playing a key role in building sound foundations for the space, as well as participating in the evaluation of its usefulness and accessibility.

12 relevant Macmillan staff were asked to take part in the pilot scheme, 11 of which joined the space, and 11 Macmillan professionals also signed up.

Usage

'We Give Our Time' has had a lively and rapid pick up amongst users – within the first four days 32 users joined, 10 new discussion topics were initiated and 52 posts were added. By 6th January 2012, the group had a total of 53 users engaged in over 20 discussion topics which had generated over 4400 page views, over 2700 of which were unique views. The "Useful Links Section" had also been accessed 57 times. This can be seen as a good start, particularly because some of this period included the Christmas break.

Views of people who give time

The pilot group of volunteers was asked to complete a short survey to help us understand their views of 'We Give Our Time' so far. 17 volunteers completed the Survey Monkey questionnaire – approximately 25% of the group. The results of the questionnaire were largely positive:

- More than half are enjoying using We Give Our Time' very much.

- The majority is finding it easy to network and communicate with each other and with Macmillan staff/ professionals.

- Most are finding it easy to access relevant information about Macmillan.

- 75% are finding the space most useful for sharing their thoughts, ideas, advice and/or information, and a significant number are finding it most useful for sharing experiences, as well as for networking and communicating.

- Almost a third agrees that 'We Give Our Time' is useful for finding out about other volunteering opportunities with Macmillan and/or Macmillan services.

- All those who have accessed the "Useful Links" section have found it useful or very useful.

- There is overall confidence in the functionality of the space (uniform to the rest of the Online Community) – 60% is finding it user-friendly, and 40% agree to some extent.

- The majority likes the discussion feature of the group, although 13% do not feel comfortable using it. Other features, such as the live chat and private messaging have been largely unused.

"I think the links are perfect as they are all in the same space and we don't have to go searching around the site."

"People like myself who are hardly technology literate, I've never even used facebook and this is so new to me, this is excellent because it's easy to use."

"A Lot of useful information. Very helpful."

"All those links enable me to look at areas that I'd never have found otherwise."

"I think a lot of people are scared to speak so just read the posts."

"I am new to these kinds of sites and not at all computer literate but have found it quite easy to navigate and have enjoyed finding out about the different volunteering roles within Macmillan and the people who work in them."

"As a novice I'm finding this method of communicating has such potential."

Views of Macmillan staff and Macmillan professionals

Staff and professionals were asked to complete a similar survey to help us understand their views of 'We Give Our Time' so far. 16 staff/professionals completed the Survey Monkey questionnaire – approximately 73% of the group. The results of the questionnaire were largely positive:

- Almost all agree that 'We Give Our Time' is enabling volunteers to network and communicate with each other and with Macmillan staff/ professionals.

- Almost all agree that the space is enabling volunteers to find relevant information about how to get involved and wider information about Macmillan.

- Almost 80% are finding 'We Give Our Time' most useful for understanding volunteers' experiences.

- Over a third agree that the space is most useful for finding out about other ways in which volunteers get involved with Macmillan and/or Macmillan services.

- More than half staff and professionals find the space user-friendly, and just under half agree to some extent.

- All staff and professionals like the discussion feature of the group, although 15% do not feel comfortable using it. Other features, such as the live chat and private messaging have been largely unused.

"I'm finding that many of the discussions relate to personal topics rather than Macmillan. Not sure we need a separate space for this as they can do this via the normal online community?"

"I think we need more reasons for staff to log on and start discussions. Staff won't spend time thinking of things to discuss so need prompting and suggestions to guide them."

"Good links to relevant documents and web pages. Good opportunity to share experiences with other volunteers and inspire others to take on new roles, activities and challenges."

"We Give Our Time is an opportunity to show volunteers that we value them."

"I think the space would benefit from discussion topics to focus the conversation toward Macmillan more."

"It's very useful and been good to see people who don't often use social media using it and finding it easy to use. I think we need to work on what sorts of things staff should be saying on the site and building confidence in this."

"The potential to use the space as a strategic tool to build greater understanding of our volunteer audience is high. However, if we are going to do this effectively there needs to be some structure and focus to the discussion topics."

Difficulties and challenges

Shortly after the launch of the pilot phase, the space moderator initiated a "feedback and suggestions" discussion. Users from the volunteer pilot group, as well as some staff and professionals used the discussion thread to raise some preliminary issues around the functionality of the space. Some of these have had a greater impact than others:

Typeface

One user reported having difficulties reading the text on 'We Give Our Time' because it was too faint. This issue was resolved very quickly and successfully by the Online Community Team who darkened the default typeface used on posts. This issue had virtually no impact on the success of 'We Give Our Time'.

Blocked posts

Another technical issue was that some users were finding their posts blocked until they were approved by a moderator. Again, this was resolved quickly and successfully by the Online Community Team and had minimum impact on the success of 'We Give Our Time'.

Email notifications function

A significant challenge throughout the whole pilot scheme so far is that the email notifications function has not been working properly. The function is supposed to notify users when someone replies to a discussion thread they have posted in (unless they disable it), but due to an underlying web development issue this has not been happening.

Instead, users have to check back into the space in order to see if their post has been answered. Whilst this may be encouraging some users to check the space more, overall it is likely to be having a negative effect on usage and engagement. Users are not being reminded to check the space for replies, and with busy schedules and other commitments, this will often mean the space is not being used as much as it could be.

The issue has been reported to the web developers and is awaiting a solution. It is still having a significant impact on the success of 'We Give Our Time'.

Features/functionality to develop

Useful Links Section

As 'We Give Our Time' develops and grows and as Macmillan builds its volunteering programme, more resources will need to be added to the Useful Links section in order to keep it up-to-date, relevant and helpful. Suggestions for additional links include volunteering case studies, corporate volunteering resources and guidance for fundraising committees. Some of these links can be added as part of this pilot scheme.

Structured Discussions

Some staff and professionals would like discussions to focus more on Macmillan and on giving time to Macmillan and/or Macmillan services. A suggested way to achieve this focus might be to structure discussions more strategically, perhaps creating or grouping discussions according to the main uses of 'We Give Our Time':

- Networking and communicating with people in similar/different roles

- Sharing experiences, thoughts, ideas, advice and/or information

- Accessing information about Macmillan, your role or area of involvement

- Accessing resources for learning and development

- Finding out about other volunteering opportunities with Macmillan and/or Macmillan services

This structure, or a similar one, could be tested as part of this pilot scheme.

Geo-tagging Function

Another ongoing area for development that has been requested by several users is a geographical search tool for the users on the space to identify others based near to them – a "geo-tagging" function. Although this is a large and costly development and therefore outside the scope of this pilot scheme, many users (volunteers, staff and professionals alike) believe it would offer a great advantage to networking and working with others. It is something that could be developed if 'We Give Our Time' were to go live and be released to the whole of Macmillan's giving time network after the pilot scheme. As a temporary substitute, users have created a discussion entitled, "Where are you", to identify user locations.

Conclusions so far

At this point – only halfway through the pilot phase of 'We Give Our Time' – the initial findings are looking promising. Volunteers, Macmillan staff and Macmillan professionals all agree that the space is achieving its aim of enabling people who give time to network and communicate and to find relevant information.

Uniting people who give time to Macmillan in many different ways within one inclusive space is proving to be a useful way of sharing and understanding thoughts, ideas, advice, information and experiences. It is also helping people find out about the different ways to get involved with Macmillan. This in turn, may be encouraging people to become more deeply involved with Macmillan.

The space is largely thought to be user-friendly by volunteers, staff and professionals and the majority like the discussion feature, although some do not feel comfortable using it. Other

features, such as the live chat and private messaging have been largely unused as yet. This, as well as comments from users, suggests that there is some work to be done in increasing user confidence.

Although there are some areas of development, difficulties and challenges still to be addressed, 'We Give Our Time' has made great progress in the short time it has been running. The final report will explore these challenges and progress in more detail, as well as any light-touch changes made to the space as a result of this report.