

VIO Online Accessibility Survey

Executive Summary

Measuring the digital inclusion of volunteer involving organisations

August 2023



Funded by the Australian Government
Department of Social Services.



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

The seven State and Territory volunteering peak bodies acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.

Foreword

The volunteering landscape and wider volunteering ecosystem are rapidly changing around us, and the use of technology and engagement platforms have become increasingly important in ensuring volunteers and the organisations supporting them remain informed, connected, and can easily access the support they need.

We are aware that levels of online accessibility and digital capability vary considerably across the diverse range of organisations within the volunteering sector, and across different States and Territories. Initial investigations into online accessibility identified a few common issues and core challenges, but revealed numerous gaps in existing knowledge and great inconsistency in how data around this theme is collected across jurisdictions.

This research report was commissioned to build on those initial findings and address the knowledge gaps, establish a consistent methodology for data collection and provide a clear baseline assessment for the current state of Volunteer Involving Organisations' (VIOs) online accessibility across all States and Territories. The research was carried out independently by Survey Matters, a highly reputable company with a track record of designing and delivering high quality survey instruments and analysis. They have been an excellent partner, and we thank them for their expertise, collaboration, and creativity in delivering this project.

The Report findings serve as a clear roadmap for the volunteering sector, Government partners, and wider stakeholders to determine where future resourcing and capability building activities should be targeted and how to track their impact over time more easily. For the first time, VIOs have comprehensive information about the key online accessibility challenges and opportunities, the differing needs of organisations within their networks, comparisons across States and Territories, and a better understanding of specific jurisdictional challenges such as geography and local technological infrastructure and the role they play in online accessibility.

The Report will inform national and jurisdictional recommendations to improve online accessibility and address some of the barriers identified. We look forward to learning from the Report and implementing the changes and practical solutions our sector needs to continue to ensure that volunteering is safe, ethical, inclusive, and sustainable.

The State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies

August 2023

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Methodology

Research Objectives

The primary objective of the **VIO Online Accessibility Survey** was to enhance the understanding of the State and Territory Volunteering Peak Bodies about the capacity and capability of Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) to access online volunteer management support services and resources.

The purpose is to ensure that online resources developed through the Volunteering Peak Bodies to support the activities of VIOs are accessible and meet the needs of all organisations, with the specific aim of preventing the exclusion of organisations unable to access online materials.

Survey Instrument

The survey questionnaire was developed by Survey Matters, in conjunction with the Volunteering Peak Bodies project working group.

To meet the research objectives, the survey instrument included questions designed to specifically measure digital access along the dimensions of current digital capacity, staff and volunteer capability, barriers to digital usage and ways to improve accessibility. It also included demographic and profiling questions, designed to group VIOs into logical segments, including state, location, focus area and size.

Specifically, the questionnaire addressed:

- **Digital capacity** – questions around digital technology assets ownership, capacity and functionality, internet access and reliability, digital support and IT infrastructure and policies around data management, privacy and cybersecurity.
- **Digital capability** – questions to measure the skills and knowledge of staff and volunteers, access to digital training, attitudes to technology, current use of digital technologies to communicate and delivery services to volunteers.
- **Barriers & needs** – questions to interrogate barriers to access, satisfaction with current digital access, perceived ability to access Volunteering Peak Bodies online resources, specific cultural and language barriers and needs, specific needs of priority groups.

Distribution

The Volunteering Peak Bodies (VPBs), and newly created lists were the primary means of disseminating the survey to VIOs. The research used an anonymous survey link, capable of being distributed across multiple channels, for example, personal email to specific recipients, contact lists, electronic direct mail (EDM) or e-newsletters, via websites or through social media posts.

As a result, this was a convenience sample where respondents self-selected by participating in the survey.

Three main distribution methods were used:

1. Personal invitation to VPB members

The survey link was distributed by the VPBs to their members, using a variety of methods including distribution via direct email, inclusion in newsletters and posting on social media.

2. Distribution by industry collaborators

The survey was also distributed to a range of other organisations working with VIOs, with requests that they forward the survey link to their stakeholder base. Potential collaborators were also provided with a communication package outlining the purpose of the research, instructions for distribution and the optimum method(s) of distribution of the link to their individual stakeholders.

3. Distribution to newly created lists of VIOs

Survey Matters created a mailing list from the ACNC Charity Register, as well as from other publicly available websites used by VIOs. Lists were created to assist VIO representation from key target groups as well as sectors such as sport, education, health, local government, religious and environmental groups. These lists were used to send personal invitations to publicly identified contacts at a range of VIOs.

Effects of Distribution Methods on Responses

Potential participants tend to respond differently depending on how the survey link (or invitation) is distributed. Typically, when an individual is directly invited to take part in a survey through a personal email, from a known organisation, response rates are higher. This may be because the 'call to action' is specifically sought, and individuals feel more obliged to respond.

Links distributed through EDMs or e-newsletters tend to have a moderate response rate, although not as high as a personal invitation. Survey links placed on websites and social media posts tend to attract the lowest response rate for anonymous surveys.

Timing

The survey links were sent to VIOs by the respective VPBs across Australia at various times from 6 March 2023 to 8 May 2023. Distribution times were at the discretion of VPBs to suit their communications schedules.

This meant that distribution was fragmented across the different states and territories, with some sending the survey within the first week, and others at various other times up to the beginning of May 2023.

Sample

A total of 448 fully completed responses were received from distribution of the anonymous survey link by the VPBs and industry collaborators, with a further 107 fully completed responses obtained from the list created for direct distribution to VIOs. A further 81 partially completed responses were added to the sample, by including data where respondents had completed at least 50% of the survey.

While the exact number of VIOs is unknown, with thousands of VIO's operating across Australia, a sample of 636 provides a +/-3.89% margin of error.

Further, as the total size and composition of all the VIOs in Australia, or any of the individual States and Territories was not known at the time of the survey, no assumptions are made as to its representativeness. Responses were highest from VIOs in Victoria, Queensland and South Australia, all of whom distributed stand-alone emails to their members.

However, throughout the data collection period, the sample distribution was monitored based on the location of charities registered in the ACNC Charity Register and every effort was made to ensure that responses were received from each State and Territory, from both metropolitan and regional locations and across a wide range of VIOs of different sizes and focus areas. While it is understood that not all VIO's are registered charities, this provides a useful proxy for understanding the spread of VIOs across Australia.

Based on this, a reasonable cross-section of respondents was achieved and while individual data is not representative within each State and Territory, a number of overall population-level inferences can be drawn from the data in this report.

Open End Feedback

As well as 41 quantitative questions, the survey also included 10 open end questions that provided respondents with an opportunity to provide free text or verbatim feedback. These provide richness, nuance and depth to the findings, and form the foundation of many of the key findings of the report. We recommend the free text comments are read in conjunction with the quantitative results to enhance understanding of the digital capacity, capability and challenges faced by VIOs accessing online resources.

Executive Summary

The Volunteer Management Activity (VMA) is a national collaboration between all volunteering peak bodies. It delivers a consistent approach to building effective volunteering practices, increasing the diversity of volunteers, and achieving volunteer management excellence. Funded by the Australian Government, it aims to increase opportunities and accessibility for people to take part in their community through volunteering and ensure VIOs have helpful online tools, information sources, and practical resources to support them.

Along with improving access to volunteering with key priority groups, one of the objectives of the VPBs is to develop online services and resources to build the capacity of VIOs. These resources will provide information around best practice recruitment and training of volunteers, volunteer management and retention, and regulatory obligations and risk management.

To ensure Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) can utilise these online resources, the VPBs sponsored the **VIO Online Capability Survey** to understand VIO's digital capacity and capability. The survey investigated the digital capacity, capability and experiences of VIOs, including access to digital systems, internet connectivity, staff and volunteer skills and the use of information technology. It also sought to identify any barriers to online access and technology use to assess potential impact on use of VPBs resources.

The survey was conducted in March and April 2023, and 636 VIOs provided feedback about their digital capacity and capability.

Access to digital technologies is vital for VIOs in managing their operations efficiently, maintaining service delivery, and communicating with their communities of interest.

To understand the digital capacity of VIOs, the survey first sought to understand VIOs access to digital technology tools. To do this, the survey asked several questions about the digital technology, software, systems, communication tools and social media used by VIOs.

In terms of digital hardware, most VIOs report access to basic hardware. More than four in five responding organisations use laptops and mobile phones, and these are the most used devices. Those without access to digital devices tend to say volunteers provide their own technology.

Conversely, adoption of software and systems designed for operational management and service delivery is relatively low among VIOs, except for the larger ones. About two-thirds use accounting software, but only a third use more specialised software like customer relationship management (CRM) systems, and a quarter use HR and volunteer management systems.

Specialised people management systems are predominantly used by larger, capital city-based VIOs. Interestingly, staff and volunteer management systems are more prevalent in the health or local government sector, while client/case management systems are commonly used by those providing community and aged care services.

A significant portion of surveyed organisations (30%) rely on traditional methods like telephone, face to face, and paper to manage their operations to some degree.

Overall, while most VIOs have some access to technology, there is a clear digital divide between metropolitan organisations and their rural counterparts.

Connection to a reliable internet connection is also a key indicator of digital capacity.

Positively, most VIOs can access the internet in some way, although the digital divide is still very evident.

Almost half of VIOs use fixed-line connections such as WiFi or ethernet, particularly in metropolitan areas. Perhaps due to cost or a lack of fixed premises, however, only 31% of micro-organisations have access to a fixed line connection.

Many VIOs also rely on mobile connections, with a combination of fixed-line and mobile the second most common way VIOs connect to the internet. Overall, 6% of respondents rely solely on mobile-only connections, although they are the only method of internet access for 25% of VIOs in remote areas and 19% of micro-organisations.

Access to reliable internet remains a challenge for many VIOs, particularly in remote areas, where 17% of VIOs report having no internet access at all.

When it comes to technology investment, nearly half of VIOs have recently upgraded their systems, though cost remains a barrier for many, particularly smaller organisations.

Over the past year, 49% of VIOs have invested in new technologies or digital assets, with medium and large organisations demonstrating the highest propensity to replace technology assets. The main areas of investment are in software upgrades, hardware, and website improvements.

Financial constraints, lack of perceived need, limited knowledge and expertise, reliance on personal devices, and the preferences of volunteers are the main barriers to investment. Most organisations prioritise funds to direct service provision, making it challenging to allocate resources to digital investments.

VIOs use a variety of means to communicate with their communities and recruit volunteers, with social media use widespread.

When communicating with staff, volunteers and communities, email is used by over nine in ten organisations, making it the most common means of communication.

Social media platforms also play a key role in VIOs communication strategies. Overall, 86% of respondents indicate their organisation uses social media to connect with their staff, volunteers and community of interest. Facebook is the most popular platform across all types of VIOs, followed by Instagram. LinkedIn and Twitter are primarily used by larger, city-based organisations, while other platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, and Pinterest have relatively low usage rates across all types and sizes of VIOs.

Video conferencing tools like MS Teams and Zoom are used by approximately two thirds (66%) of VIOs and have become embedded in most medium and large organisations. At 25%, uptake in remote areas is significantly lower, possibly as a result of technological barriers such as reliable internet access which is imperative for effective functioning of these tools.

Perhaps a result of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period, video conferencing tools are more widely used in Victoria, at 75%. This compares to only 69% of VIOs in New South Wales, 57% in Western Australia and 55% in Queensland.

Despite the proliferation of online communication, however, when it comes to recruitment, word of mouth remains the most effective way to source volunteers.

When asked to rate their overall digital capacity, specifically in relation to its currency, effectiveness in supporting service delivery and organisational operations, three in five VIOs are positive.

More specifically, around seven in ten VIOs believe their technology is up-to-date, supports effective service delivery, and aids in running their organisation efficiently. At 67%, slightly fewer agree their digital technology supports the learning and development needs of VIOs, however 79% are committed to maintaining robust data protection and security.

Medium-sized organisations are most satisfied with their digital infrastructure, with approximately four in five agreeing their technology is current and supports service delivery and efficiency.

With more resources to invest in IT infrastructure and information systems, large VIOs are most likely to say their technology is up-to-date (79%). However, it appears a point is reached when it gets more complex, and size and scale reduce efficiencies.

Only 63% of micro and 66% of small organisations feel their technology is up-to-date, while similar proportions agree that their digital technology supports effective service delivery and enables efficient operations.

In terms of geographical location, rural and remote VIOs are less likely to have access to current technology, with only 62% of rural VIOs and 42% of remote VIOs indicating their technology supports effective service delivery. In contrast, approximately seven in ten metropolitan or regional VIOs believe their digital technology is current and supports their operations effectively, highlighting the digital divide between urban and rural/remote areas.

The ability to access online tools and resources is dependent not just on access to technology, but staff and volunteers having the skills and knowledge to employ these tools effectively.

Assessing overall digital competency, 61% of VIOs rate their staff as good or excellent. On average, over seven in ten VIOs agree their staff are confident and they possess the skills and knowledge, to use digital technology. Once more, a higher proportion of city based, medium and large organisations agree their staff have adequate skills and knowledge to use digital technology than smaller, regionally based VIOs.

While most VIOs rely on volunteers to obtain skills from other sources, 45% provide digital skills training to their staff. Those VIOs who do not offer digital skills training cite budget constraints, lack of need, or time limitations, alongside a lack of skills or digital literacy. This is particularly evident among older volunteers.

While most VIOs use a combination of face-to-face and online methods for training, remote and rural areas, and micro-organisations, are more likely to use only face-to-face training, potentially reflecting limited internet access or a preference for a more personalised approach.

Two thirds of all VIOs rate their ability to access and share resources, tools, and information online as good or excellent.

Despite this, there is a clear trend for metropolitan based VIOs to rate their capability highly (72%) than regional (65%), rural (55%), and remote VIOs (50%). Moreover, micro-organisations are significantly less likely (53%) than their larger counterparts to indicate their organisation has the capability to access and share resources online.

Similar patterns are evident in VIOs ability to participate in online training and support, with an overall 63% of VIOs rating their ability as good or excellent. Organisation size tends to have the most impact in this area, with small and micro-organisations (53% and 44% respectively) significantly less likely to rate their ability to participate in online training and support highly, than medium (72%) and large (81%) organisations.

In terms of managing volunteer recruitment and retention online, overall, 55% of VIOs rate their ability as good or excellent. Location tends to have more impact on online volunteer management capability than size.

The primary barriers to online engagement among VIOs are a lack of time, resources and funding for technology investments.

Many organisations report a chronic lack of time as the main obstacle to progress. While only around a quarter of VIOs consider lack of time and resources as their top challenge, 62% rank this within their top three issues, indicating a persistent concern across organisations. As one respondent stated, "we are a small team with a big workload, so time is our biggest challenge".

The second most significant obstacle is funding for technology investment. This is the top issue for 30% of VIOs, with 55% listing it among their top three. This financial constraint impedes the ability of VIOs to adopt, maintain, and upgrade digital technologies, leading to compromised quality in tech support and services with respondents indicating "cost would be a barrier if we needed to update all our digital technologies".

Staff-related issues, such as lack of digital skills and confidence, are also prevalent. Seven percent (7%) of VIOs highlight staff skills as their top challenge, with a third including it in their top three. Further, 43% of VIOs say staff skills and knowledge restricts their ability to use online resources.

Staff resistance to digital technology is another significant hurdle. Many comments suggest they have "staff and volunteers who are either not accustomed to using technology, or whose experience using technology is significantly out of date" or their "volunteer base is in the 'aged' bracket who were not brought up with technology."

Infrastructure inadequacies also contribute to the challenges faced by VIOs in their adoption of digital technology, with between 4 and 6% of VIOs citing issues like outdated software and information systems, aging infrastructure, and reliable internet access as top challenges. These issues are included in the top three for between 16 and 23% of VIOs.

Remote areas face specific infrastructure challenges, with 42% reporting technology and internet access as an issue. Smaller and medium-sized organisations also have these limitations, implying resource constraints in these entities.

VIOs provided many suggestions that would help them overcome these barriers to digital engagement.

Amongst other things, suggestions include support with digital training tailored to specific roles would be helpful. Respondents suggest there is value in free online courses, webinars, and training modules to foster continuous learning.

Funding is also crucial to overcome digital barriers, including financial aid for equipment, technology infrastructure, IT personnel, and staff training. VIOs suggest they would benefit from access to cost-effective technology resources, reliable internet, and robust IT support systems, including volunteer management software, access to licenses at a negotiated cost, and discounted hardware.

Many VIOs express a need for expert advice to navigate IT challenges and optimise digital systems usage, with suggestions to create a hotline for free, non-technical IT guidance.

Nearly nine in ten VIOs indicate online volunteer management resources would be useful to their organisation.

Respondents say these resources would provide consistency and standardisation across the sector or would provide greater access to the information they need. Others suggest online resources would contribute to the skill development and education of staff and volunteers and help by bridging funding and resource constraints experienced by many VIOs.

Although fewer in number, organisations who indicate online resources would be of little value to them suggest they were not needed; either they already have this knowledge or that these types of resources are already available.

Others note users would need a base level of digital literacy to access them or that there is unlikely to be enough interest in using online resources, suggesting reluctance to change the current way they are managing their volunteers.

Three quarters of respondents are confident their organisation would use online resources designed to assist with recruitment, retention, training and management of volunteers.

Most commonly, VIOs indicate they see potential to use online resources to improve the volunteer experience. Others highlight the potential of online resources to streamline volunteer management processes and increase efficiency. Respondents say they would use online resources that could simplify tasks such as recruitment, rostering, communication, and reporting, and suggest online resources might also save time and reduce administrative burdens. Feedback also suggests VIOs see value in using online resources to help them follow best practices in volunteer management.

In another prominent theme, VIOs would use the resources to improve their training and development within their organisation.

Respondents express a desire for online resources to provide induction training for new volunteers, upskill existing volunteers, and educate staff and volunteer managers on best practices in volunteer recruitment, retention, and management.

Conclusion

Overall, while most VIOs have some access to technology, there is a clear digital divide between metropolitan and regional VIOs, as well as between larger and smaller entities.

This is evident in their varied access to online resources. Metropolitan and larger VIOs are typically more digitally capable due to better resources, whereas regional, rural, remote, and smaller organisations often face substantial barriers such as limited funding, lack of time and outdated technology.

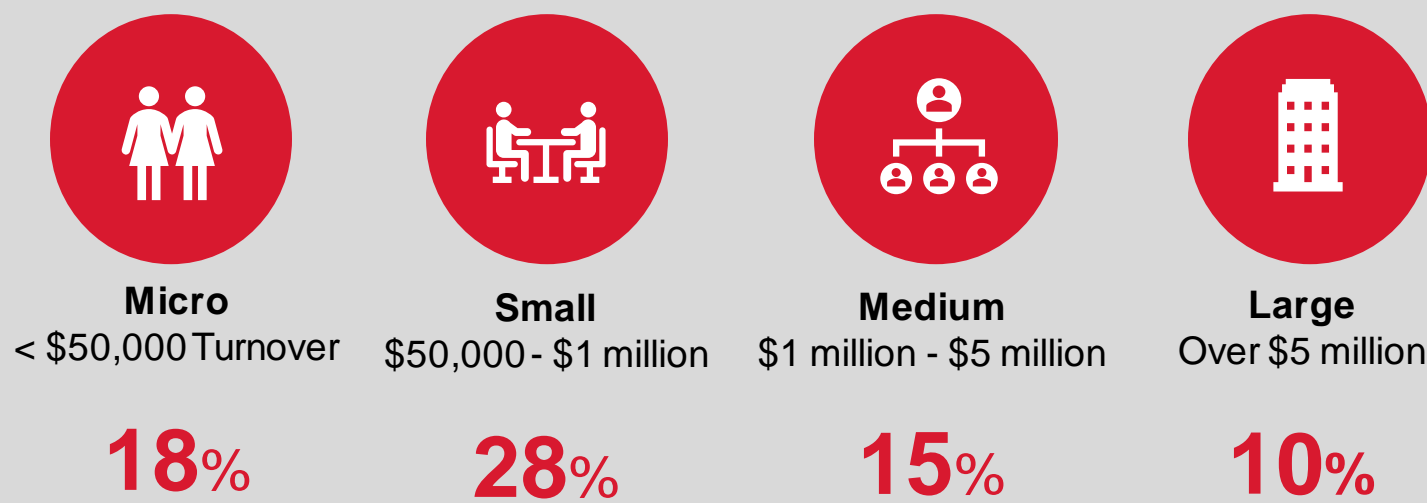
Further, results suggest the digital literacy of staff and volunteers is a barrier to online engagement. There is openness to targeted support to enhance digital competency among staff and volunteers, thus improving their overall digital capability and effectiveness.

Positively, there is recognition among VIOs of the role digital tools and resources can play in improving their operational capacity. A majority of VIOs appear to believe online resources can equip them with best practice strategies to recruit and retain volunteers effectively, as well as more efficient ways to manage and train them, thus improving their overall service delivery.

Positively, a majority of VIOs believe online resources would equip them with best practice strategies to recruit and retain volunteers effectively, and more efficient ways to manage and train them.

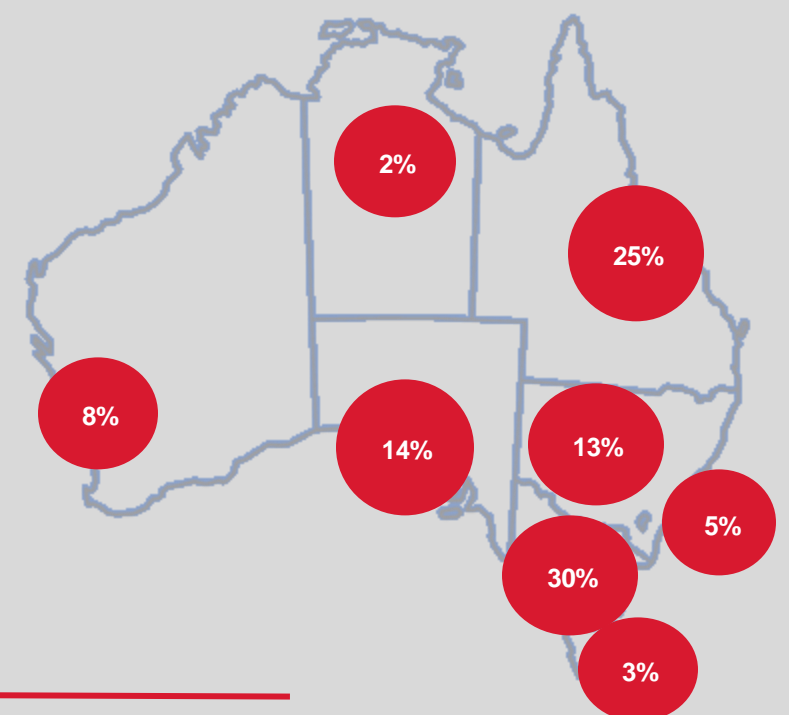
Respondent Profile

636 VIOs responded to the survey, ranging from the smallest grass-roots organisations through to very large entities



Location	%
Capital city / metropolitan area	56%
Regional city / town	29%
Rural area	13%
Remote area	2%

VIOs operate across all States and Territories & all locations



VIOs engage over **308,000** volunteers on a regular basis

47%

Have less than 5 paid staff

51%

Have between 10 and 100 regular volunteers

153,900

Additional volunteers engaged on an ad-hoc or project basis

Top Ten Focus Areas

Community Services	21%
Arts, Culture & Museums	10%
Sport / Recreation	7%
Environment & Conservation	6%
Local Government	6%
Seniors & Aged Care	6%
Health + Mental Health	6%
Family & Young People	6%
Disability Services	4%
Emergency Response / Disaster Relief	4%

Key Findings

01

Digital Capacity

- In terms of digital capacity, most VIOs report access to basic hardware. Laptops (89%) and mobile phones (85%) are the most used devices, followed by desktop computers (72%) and tablets (46%). Adoption of software and systems designed for operational management and service delivery is relatively low among VIOs, except for the larger ones.
- Most VIOs can access the internet in some way, although the digital divide does still exist. While most VIOs have a fixed line connection, mobile-only connections are the only method of internet access for some VIOs in remote areas (25%) and within micro-organisations (19%). Further, access to reliable internet remains a challenge for many VIOs, particularly in remote areas, where 17% of VIOs report having no internet access at all.
- Over the past year, 49% of VIOs have invested in new technologies or digital assets, with medium and large organisations demonstrating the highest inclination to replace technology assets. However, cost and budget remains a barrier to investment for many, particularly smaller organisations.
- Approximately nine in ten VIOs indicate their organisation uses email and social media to connect with their staff, volunteers and community of interest. Facebook is the most popular platform across all types of VIOs, followed by Instagram. Video conferencing tools like MS Teams and Zoom are used by approximately two thirds of VIOs and have become embedded in most medium and large organisations.
- Despite the proliferation of online communication, when it comes to volunteer recruitment, word of mouth remains the most popular method.
- Around seven out of ten VIOs believe that their technology is up-to-date (71%), supports effective service delivery (74%), and aids in running their organisation efficiently (75%).

02

Digital Capability

- Assessing overall digital competency, 61% of VIOs rated their staff as good or excellent. On average, 74% of VIOs agree that their staff were confident and 77% agree they possess the skills and knowledge to use digital technology.
- While most VIOs rely on volunteers to obtain skills from other sources, 45% provide digital skills training to their staff. Those VIOs who do not offer digital skills training cite budget constraints, lack of need, or time limitations and lack of skills or digital literacy, particularly among older volunteers.
- Two thirds (67%) of VIOs rate their ability to access and share resources, tools, and information online as good or excellent, while 63% of VIOs rate their ability to participate in online training and support, as good or excellent.
- In terms of managing volunteer recruitment and retention online, overall, 55% of VIOs rate their ability as good or excellent.

03

Barriers to Online Engagement

- Many organisations report a chronic lack of time as the main obstacle to digital progress. While only 26% of VIOs consider lack of time and resources as their top challenge, a considerable 62% ranked this within their top three,
- The second most significant obstacle is funding for technology investment. This ranks as the top issue for 30% of VIOs, with 55% listing it among their top three. Nearly a third (31%) of VIOs say that their organisation's ability to use online resources is limited by technology and access to the internet.
- Staff-related issues, such as lack of digital skills and confidence, are also prevalent. Seven percent of VIOs highlight staff skills as their top challenge, with a third including it in their top three. Further, 43% of VIOs said that staff skills and knowledge restricted their ability to use online resources.
- Infrastructural inadequacies also contribute to the challenges faced by VIOs in their adoption of digital technology, with between 4-6% of VIOs citing issues like outdated software and information systems, aging infrastructure, and reliable internet access as their number one barrier to online engagement. These issues were in the top three for between 16-23% of the organisations.

04

Supporting Digital Engagement

- To overcome these barriers, VIOs indicate they need support with digital training including resources such as free online courses, webinars, and training modules to foster continuous learning.
- Funding is also crucial to overcome digital barriers, including financial aid for equipment, technology infrastructure, IT personnel, and staff training.
- Many VIOs also expressed a need for expert advice to navigate IT challenges and optimise digital systems usage, suggesting the creation of a hotline for free, non-technical IT guidance.

05

Interest in Online Resources

- Nearly nine in ten VIOs indicate online volunteer management resources would be useful to their organisation.
- Three quarters of respondents are confident that their organisation would use online resources designed to assist with recruitment, retention, training and management of volunteers.
- VIOs see potential to use online resources to improve the volunteer experience, increase efficiency and save time by streamlining tasks such as recruitment, rostering, communication, and reporting.

About

Volunteering Peak Bodies

Volunteering Peak Bodies represent and respond to the needs of volunteer-involving organisations and volunteers, ensure they are kept informed with all the latest news and developments in the wider volunteering landscape, undertake policy/advocacy work on their behalf, and provide ongoing training and sector development activities to build capability and promote best practice.

Every State and Territory across Australia has peak representation and can be contacted directly.

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Survey Matters

Survey Matters specialises in providing research services to membership and not-for-profit organisations and have worked with a wide range of organisations to help understand their value proposition – who their key audience(s) are, what is important to key stakeholders, how satisfied they are with performance in key areas and the products or services that they value and use.

We also work with the sector to generate and build industry data and knowledge to support advocacy, promotion, industry development and marketing activities. Our deep knowledge of stakeholder engagement is coupled with our experience using evidence-based approaches to research and strategic planning,

With a focus on membership-based, oversight and community organisations, Survey Matters is proud to have worked with a large and diverse number of customers from these sectors over the past twelve years.

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