Volunteering after COVID – rethinking the model

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Like many gardens around the world, the Botanic Gardens and State Herbarium of South Australia (BGSH) relies on volunteers to extend and augment the work carried out by paid staff. Post-COVID, however, the volunteer landscape has changed. A 2022 report by Volunteering Australia notes the impact of COVID-19 on volunteering. Without doubt, some of the volunteers who left the "volunteer-force" at this time have not returned, and others are looking for different types of opportunities.

Whilst there are some in the community who still seek volunteering opportunities through traditional programs, there are many who prefer a more flexible approach, including micro-volunteering, episodic and/or digital volunteering as well as opportunities around corporate volunteering.

As part of a broader review of our community engagement programs we identified key shortcomings and challenges in our approach to volunteering. These included issues in governance, record-keeping, WHS management and siloed volunteer management and support, to a fundamental mismatch between a traditional "program-based" model and the needs of contemporary volunteers.

Over the last 18 months our strategy has proved successful. Most fundamentally the emergence of an "engagement model" based on a far more diverse set of volunteers, motivations and needs has led to a significant growth in both the numbers and diversity of volunteers. The strategy has more closely knitted our volunteer work across all areas of our business and we have recognised the strong link between giving time and other forms of giving, and the progression from early-career work experience and internships with a longer and more diverse volunteer engagement. The volunteer strategy, recent case studies, and key next steps are explored in this presentation.