

Queens Botanical Garden



BACKGROUND

Queens Botanical Garden (QBG) is a 39-acre urban oasis in one of New York City's most bustling and diverse neighborhoods: Flushing, NY. It's where people, plants, and cultures are celebrated through inspiring gardens, innovative educational programs, and real-world applications of environmental stewardship. QBG evolved from the five-acre "Gardens on Parade" exhibit showcased at the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair. Officially opening as "The Queens Botanical Garden Society" in 1946 after local residents saved and expanded the original exhibit, the Garden remained at the original World's Fair site until 1961, when it was moved to its current location on Main Street in Flushing.

Eryn Hatzithomas is the Community Engagement Manager at QBG. She is a member of the Garden's Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI) club and is the Vice Chair lead of the American Public Garden Association's volunteer management community. Eryn explains "At QBG we have about 80 staff, over 400 interns, and about 2,500 event volunteers to support our garden annually. So, to accomplish this, one of my jobs is to partner with community organizations and members to support the programs. And because Queens, New York, has over 2 million residents, and is one of the most diverse communities in the United States, part of that engagement is important to include our commitment to DEAI and belonging as part of a key engagement effort."

When Eryn started as a Volunteer Coordinator at the garden, she inherited the volunteer program which she recalls being large but very disconnected. She says "there was mostly **a lot of paper everywhere and Excel**. That was too much for me because there were a lot of people and needs. **It wasn't sustainable to keep going in that direction.**"

CHALLENGES

Due to the lack of a centralized system, there was a high likelihood of miscommunication with volunteers and across departments. Eryn recalls, "**disjointed communication** coming from various departments. Paper timesheets spread throughout the garden meant each department managed volunteer time-tracking and communications separately. There was **no cohesive volunteer experience** across the departments, and on any given day, there was no easy way to determine who was volunteering at the garden."

It was recognized that QBG's **volunteer program was not operating in alignment with a core value of the organization – Sustainability**. "There was a lot of paper and binders and transcribing of the information in various folders on our server. We are a sustainable garden, we do all organic gardening, we have all green technology; yet, we were using a lot of paper, and I was wanting to change that," remembers Eryn.

Key Pain Points:

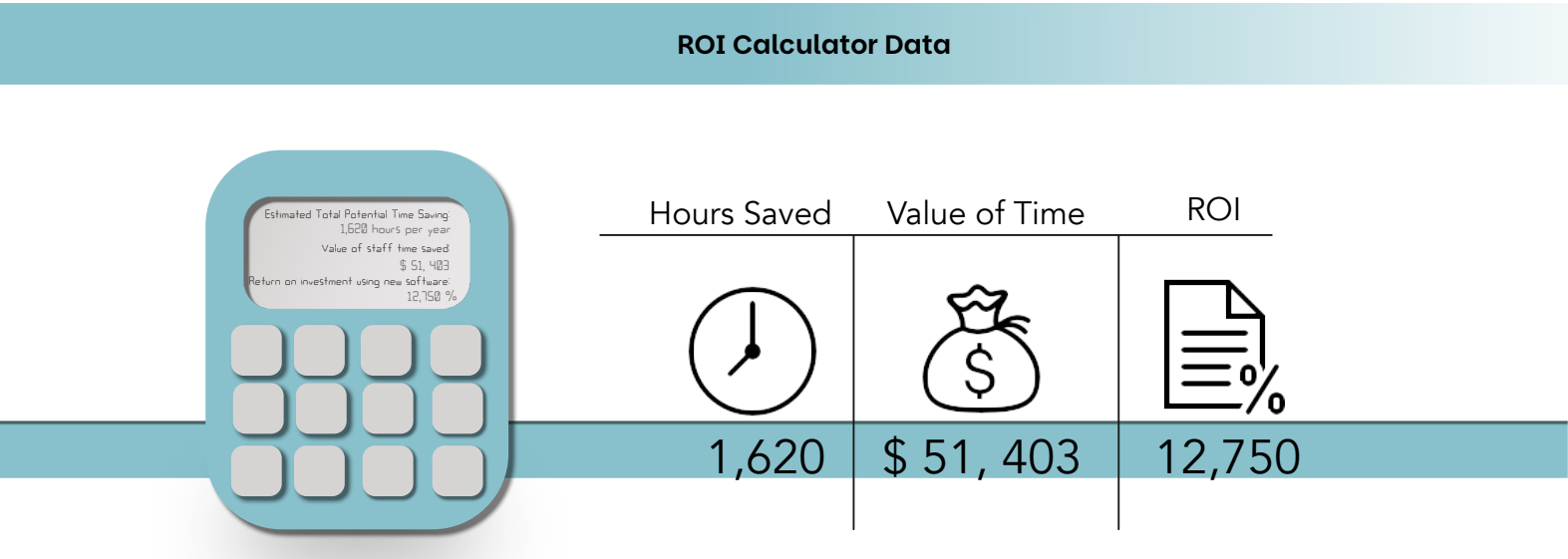
- **No centralized system** for tracking hours, contact information, posting events or recruiting volunteers.
- **Volunteer information was disjointed**, such as contact details, as it was spread out across electronic files in various folders and drives, hard copies of paper in various binders or folders, and across various locations.
- With documents, such as volunteer agreements, being paper-based and stored in various ways and locations, **securing confidential data was at risk** of being misplaced or lost.
- **Inefficient recruitment and retention practices** due to no tracking on previous volunteers and no centralized place for volunteers to find and sign up for opportunities.
- **Unreliable reports** on volunteer activity and hours due to too many tracking systems in place.

*"It took a **monumental amount of work** by the previous volunteer coordinator to produce reports that were accurate. So, I wanted to find something to help with all of that and use that time more effectively."*

- Eryn Hatzithomas



When Eryn used the [ROI Calculator](#) to determine how much time was being spent operating in this manner, it revealed that her team was going to save around 1,620 hours per year on tasks that could be automated via a volunteer management software solution.



JOURNEY

Eryn understood how to leverage technology to make it possible to operate a volunteer program within. She also had an idea of what kind of a system QBG might want to use. So, in April 2018, she started **researching** volunteer management software (VMS) solutions online. She also leaned on **peer feedback and referrals**, asking them about what tools they were using.

While **various software needs** were important to find in QBG’s chosen solution, a **centralized volunteer management database was essential** for Eryn, for these key reasons:

- 1. Makes Data Access Easier for Us *and Volunteers*
- 2. Attracts Newer & *Repeat Volunteers*
- 3. Schedule and Manage Volunteers with Ease
- 4. Promote the Impact You Are Making in Real-Time

When Eryn narrowed her focus on two VMSs, she “explored Volgistics, but I did not really love their interface. I know how to work with databases, but **I wanted the selected software to work for everybody**. I love elegant solutions. When I encountered Volunteer Impact, I thought, ‘this user interface looks so wonderful. Does it have the meat and bones behind it?’ What really sold me on Volunteer Impact was the **usability**,” Eryn remembers.

Implementation

Volunteer Impact was introduced over a six-month transition period. According to Eryn, “when we first started, I did have quite a few volunteers who were not tech savvy. They were okay with paper and were not excited about getting an online profile.” Eryn devised a **strategy of how to best orient the new system to volunteers** by first starting with “the ones I thought would be early adopters. Everyone who was new got onboarded straight into the system. The rest, I just slowly worked on. They started to realize the benefits from it, because I had more time to engage with them.”

Eryn’s **patience paid off**, and much of her success came from **implementing the change** gradually so that volunteers and staff could adjust to the change. “Once they were on board, they didn't want to go back!”

Why Volunteer Impact

It was important for Eryn to have a software solution where **everything was in one place**. She knew this would make it easier for volunteers to sign up for shifts, inquire about opportunities, and log their hours.

Eryn explains, "That's one of the many things I like about Volunteer Impact, and it was so **customizable**. I can look at someone's profile and be able to **access all the necessary information**. I can view their various agreements and documents. I can ask them questions such as 'why do they want to volunteer?' I know their motivations. I know their T-shirt size. I know how to contact them. And, if I'm looking for a volunteer to fill in for a different role, I can **leverage the data** on their profile record, such as what they are interested in and/or qualifications, to encourage them to try additional opportunities for which they're a good match."

Some of Eryn's favorite Volunteer Impact features include:

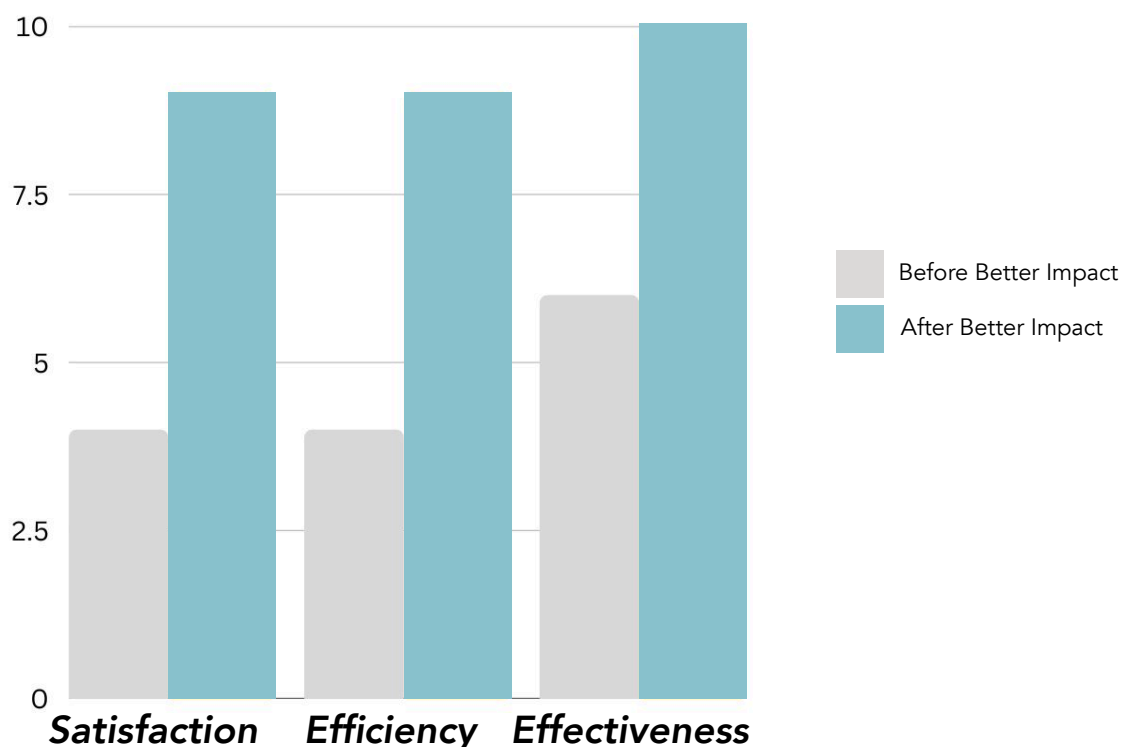
- **Volunteers On the Clock.** I can tell who is volunteering at any given time and what role they are doing. I'm a visual person so having their names and photos easily available helps me to remember who everyone is.
- **Volunteer Portal & App.** Volunteers can update their information, sign up for activities, answer customized onboarding questions, upload important documents like vaccination cards, and track their hours. People are used to having a digital profile these days. It makes them feel part of the club and they feel like they're a member of the Garden.
- **Reporting Functionality.** Being able to track all this data about our volunteers helps me make great impact reports to show the value the volunteers bring to our organization in support of our mission.

*"Better Impact is a **One-Stop-Shop!** The system tracks everything we need to manage our volunteer program."*

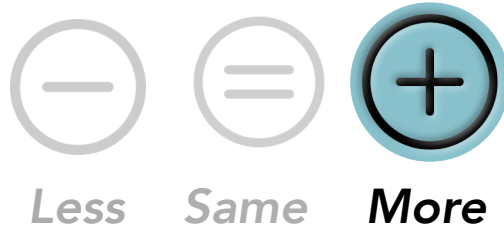
- Eryn Hatzithomas

RESULTS

Eryn credits part of the volunteer program's recovery to Volunteer Impact, after the pandemic reduced it to a fourth of its pre-pandemic size. "Having an incredible organizational tool was the only way to smoothly maneuver during those fluctuating times. It was quite easy to be able to recover having Volunteer Impact, and **our program is now bigger than ever.**" says Eryn.



Since switching to Volunteer Impact, do you feel your data is LESS, the SAME, or MORE secure?



The **elimination of paper** use has been a major shift at QBG. “I have no paper anymore...anywhere! People are totally befuddled by how that is possible. If there is a piece of paper, it gets scanned, and it gets added to the person's profile,” explains Eryn.

Through reporting, the software has made it possible for Eryn to **demonstrate the volunteer program's impact**. Eryn shares, “a big part of what I do is reporting, and Volunteer Impact allows me, on a very granular level, to get all that data to showcase the good work we're doing.” In QBG's last fiscal year, they were able to highlight they had over 2,500 event volunteers giving over 50,000 total volunteer hours, which is almost equivalent to 30 full-time employees. Given that QBG are a 35 full-time employee operation, **Volunteer Impact has empowered the organization to expand in a way that has nearly doubled its capacity**.

Most important to Eryn was to be more involved with staff and volunteers; really get to know them. “I wanted to make sure volunteers were properly onboarded and felt supported. I didn't want to spend all my time doing administrative tasks, like figuring out what shifts people wanted to do. **Volunteer Impact put time back in my day that I use to engage with people and build stronger relationships**. I hear that's what makes volunteers excited to come to the garden and work with us. They want those relationships too!”

With the right VMS in place – Volunteer Impact – and strong relationships, QBG's volunteer program is thriving.

“I'm so glad we found Volunteer Impact to support our volunteer program here at the Garden.”

- Eryn Hatzithomas

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