

OCHA's Virtual Response Roster (VRR)¹



Traditionally, we have always focused on adding more (physical) staff into the emergency arena in order to address the various information/coordination needs and demands. With significant improvements in Internet connectivity and online collaboration tools over the past several years, we are now in an age where we can enable remote support during an emergency. Not only can we add remote capacity, but we can add specialists.

General Concept

As a means to augment deployed staff, the VRR would act as a pool of specialists who could provide remote assistance during an emergency. Based on expressed interest during previous sudden onset emergencies, it is understood that there would always be several staff who would be willing to volunteer to help, but could not deploy as they are either not part of the ERR or will not be released from their on-going work for an extended period. These staff would be placed on a loosely formalized virtual team and would be expected to spare one to three hours per day during the early phases of an emergency. By formalizing this approach, staff would be given recognition for their support during an emergency.

Remote Support Opportunities

The opportunities for this virtual team would be limited only by our own imagination. Although most tasking would remain small and concrete such as translation, data cleaning, and infographic production, we could really leverage the knowledge and experience of our staff. For example, if a Haitian staff member working in Afghanistan wants to respond after the 2010 earthquake there is little chance s/he would be released. However, as a virtual responder, s/he could be providing valuable cultural insight, suggesting recommended contacts, augmenting situational understanding, translating the situation report into Creole, and offering other advice to the OCHA team either responding or managing the response from HQ/RO.

How It Would Work

The virtual roster would not work in the same fashion as a traditional roster. Rather, emergency teams, with one overall coordinator, would be created from OCHA volunteers at the onset of a new emergency. Within each emergency team, defined sub-groups would be created - each with a dedicated virtual coordinator - for relevant specialties. These teams would work together using online collaborative tools such as Google Docs and Skype. It will be imperative that the overall coordinator has a connection with the physical responding team.

Tasking would always remain well defined, very concrete in a nature (e.g. management of UNDAC email account, data entry, etc.), and needs to be driven by the field. The physical responders will need to, in collaboration with the coordinators, clearly articulate the task requirements, provide required templates, and point out any examples of preferred product styles. Feedback on tasking will be required, but must remain a simple procedure.

¹ Final title of such a team is very much up for negotiation. Another suggestion: Virtual Emergency Support Team (VEST)

If OCHA wants to expand this concept to provide support to protracted emergencies, the virtual roster could also include roster members who join for a set period. This component would then be administered in a very similar manner to the current ERR.

Ad-hoc Trail Completed - Libya

This approach was used during the first month of the Libya crisis within the information management realm. A simple message was sent out to all OCHA IMOs asking for volunteers and the focus was mostly on providing 3W support. The tasking and offices that supported:

- Data Collection
 - Ethiopia
 - Iraq
 - Kenya
 - ROSEA
- Compilation and Cleaning
 - DRC (GIS Datasets)
 - Pakistan
 - Geneva
- Products
 - DRC (Infographic)
 - Pakistan (3W Maps)
 - NY (various infographics)

Given that this approach was put together ‘on-the-fly”, it demonstrated huge potential. OCHA used public sources to collect 3W information, leveraged several offices to create products, and then printed the resulting products for distribution in the emergency arena. This support enabled the deployed IMO to focus on other issues within the response. As one can see, this approach augmented OCHA’s ability to respond to Libya.

OCHA Next Steps

Beyond the obvious need to have senior management support and agree to move the concept forward there are various steps that should be taken:

1. Required resources to manage the roster, both during emergency and non-emergency times, are provided,
2. Roster management team is established,
3. Guidance materials, including roster placement, activation, tasking, performance appraisal and overall management, are drafted and formalized,
4. Standard core teams/specialties required during most emergencies (IM, translation, local knowledge, etc) are defined, and
5. OCHANet profiles are developed allowing staff to define their skills and knowledge thereby enabling OCHA the ability to proactively seek roster members during an emergency.

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