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Levels of Internet Use: Where Are We Now?

Background

The Dublin City University Project, The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age, is researching how Irish community and voluntary organisations are using information technologies in their work.

The project aims to develop strategies for using the Internet effectively for voluntary and community work, combatting social exclusion, and promoting democratic and sustainable development on a community, national, and international scale. The research will identify the specific Internet technologies which are more or less useful for various activities.

Several surveys are being conducted. The first identified which information technologies, ranging from office equipment to computers and e-mail, are being used and which factors encourage and discourage their use. The survey results regarding use of computers and the Internet are presented in this report.

The survey used a quantitative research method, which included: selecting a random sample of organisations, distributing a short questionnaire by post to the organisations selected, and following up the questionnaire with a letter and then a telephone call to encourage a high response rate. The questionnaire was administered from February to April 1996.

Before selecting the organisations for the survey, listings of organisations were collected from more than 20 sources, and a master list was compiled of those active in six interest areas: community development, environment and international development, women, health, youth, and religious congregations. From the master list of more than 1,500 organisations, 300 were selected randomly for the survey, 50 from each of the six interest areas.

The overall response rate was very high for a survey of this type: 82%. Of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 245 were completed and used in the analysis.

The responding organisations were almost evenly split between those located in Dublin and outside Dublin, and they were also divided fairly evenly among three categories of reported annual income: less than IRL 10,000; from IRL 10,000 to 100,000, and more than IRL 100,000. A wide range and variety of organisations were included in the survey.

- Survey Findings

1. Use of computers

Of the organisations surveyed, 85% use computers. Computer use ranges from a basic

level, such as simple word processing and printing, to a more sophisticated level involving specialised software and expensive computer hardware.

This figure of 85% varies considerably according to several factors, the most significant of which is the organisation's annual income. Lower income organisations use computer hardware at significantly lower levels than higher-income organisations. The percentage of organisations using computer hardware devices in 1995 are as follows:

For incomes more than IRL 100,000:

- computers 94%
- laser printers 70%
- CD-ROMS 30%
- modems 27%
- document scanners 12%

For incomes between IRL 10,000 and 100,000:

- computers 85%
- laser printers 46%
- CD-ROMS 10%
- modems 13%
- document scanners 7%

For incomes less than IRL 10,000:

- computers 62%
- laser printers 25%
- CD-ROMS 5%
- modems 8%
- document scanners 2%

The projected rates for 1996 were higher. The percentage of organisations planning to use computers in 1996 were: higher income 96%, middle income 90%, and lower income 65%.

Aside from low annual income, factors associated with lower computer use include: sharing an office with another organisation, having a focus on neighbourhood or parish concerns (as opposed to a wider geographical focus) and having an interest in women's issues.

Factors reported by organisations to discourage computer use include: lack of funding (reported by 62% of organisations overall and 40% of organisations with computers); and lack of time for training (reported by 30% of organisations overall and 40% of organisations with computers). Other reported factors included lack of technical support and the belief that computers are not necessary for the organisation's work.

2. Use of the Internet

The Internet uses the public telephone system to connect computers and is accessible to

any organisation with the right computer equipment and the budget to cover the Internet service and telephone charges. This computer network allows community and voluntary organisations to find, exchange and communicate information more efficiently and cheaply than by phone, fax or post.

The survey found that an Internet e-mail address is associated with a more sophisticated use of computers - many organisations using hardware such as CD-ROMS and document scanners add on a modem and Internet service as part of their general high-end approach to computer technology.

An e-mail address is a feature of 14 percent of all the organisations surveyed, but again, this figure varies considerably according to several factors, the most significant being the organisation's annual income.

Among organisations with incomes less than IRL 10,000, only three percent had an e-mail address at the time of the survey, but for those with an income of more than IRL 100,000, 27 percent had an e-mail address. An e-mail address is more prevalent also among organisations with an EU or national focus than among those with a neighbourhood focus.

The survey also found a disparity of Internet and computer use among organisations with different interests. At the bottom of the scale are those with an interest in women, which are much less likely than others to use computers or the Internet, and particularly so if they also have a low annual income.

Factors reported to encourage Internet use include: the need for better communication links (reported by 65% of organisations overall and 85% of those with an e-mail address); the need to be professional (reported by 64% of organisations); and the need for better access to information (reported by 60% of organisations).

Factors reported to discourage Internet use are similar to those reported to discourage computer use: lack of funding and lack of time for training.

3. Projected Internet Use

The questionnaire asked if the organisations were planning to use computer communications in the future. Based on their responses, a forecast can be made. By mid-1998, an Internet e-mail address will be a feature of:

Two in three higher-income organisations (income more than IRL 100,000)

One in three middle-income organisations

One in five lower-income organisations (income less than IRL 10,000)

It is impossible to project a figure for the community and voluntary sector as a whole. However, considering that many thousands of small community organisations represent a

significant part of this sector, a figure close to one in five organisations overall in 1998 with an e-mail address seems likely.

- Conclusion

In summary, the organisations with the highest level of computer and Internet use have a higher annual income, a wider geographical focus, their own premises, and a variety of interests except women's issues.

These findings have many implications, particularly regarding the Internet and the future of the voluntary and community sector. This research suggests that new communications networks forming on the Internet will tend to exclude certain organisations, particularly those that have a low income, rely on volunteers, focus on neighbourhood concerns, and deal with women's issues.

This inequality of Internet use among organisations is disturbing. It means that thousands of organisations, particularly community and women's groups, will be excluded from the emerging communication networks on the Internet.

Organisations excluded could be disadvantaged in many ways. If the Internet does become a common means of information exchange, not having Internet access could be as exclusive as not having a telephone is today.

The survey findings suggest several directions for policy, practice and research to encourage the use of computers and computer communications by community and voluntary organisations.

Policy

The first suggested policy direction is to develop an infrastructure to assist efforts by organisations to use computers, including: training, technical support, acquiring computer hardware and software and ongoing maintenance.

Survey analysis indicates that participation on the Internet will be possible only if organisations become more comfortable with and competent in the use of computers in general, and this should be the primary objective of this support infrastructure.

Second, Internet development and support initiatives should be focused on the specific "problem" areas: low-income organisations, neighbourhood organisations, and women's groups. These organisations will need strategic support in their efforts to use the Internet.

Practice

Community and voluntary organisations planning to use the Internet will first need to ensure that their general computer operations are running smoothly. Problems using computers will be carried over into using the Internet.

Second, Internet technologies will need to be used strategically. For example, if an organisation's budget is limited, a consideration should be that e-mail technologies are less expensive to use than the WorldWide Web because they involve less time online and therefore lower telephone charges.

Research

The first research direction is to identify which Internet technologies are being used, what they are being used for, and how useful they are. The second is to identify specific factors discouraging the use of the Internet and strategies for dealing with these factors.

These two directions will be the focus of the DCU project's second survey, scheduled to begin in November 1996. Voluntary and community organisations interested in being involved in the project are invited to contact the researchers.