

Over time, each professional develops his or her own method for conducting current and best practices research. There is no one best way to conduct the research; it is more a question of finding the method that works best for you and your research area. However, conducting current and best practices research generally involves three basic steps: formulation of the question, gathering preliminary information, and conducting in-depth interviews. Here are a few tips from CTG staff regarding ways to approach these three stages.

Step 1: Formulate the question

Current practices research usually starts with the formulation of a clear question. Here are two suggestions for this first step:

- Take a few minutes to think about your problem or goal. Try to break it into key elements or sub-topics. Write down a series of words or phrases describing the topic and elements using different synonyms. This vocabulary expansion exercise will be particularly useful for doing an Internet search or a literature review.
- Scope out your topic. Think of issues typically associated with your particular topic. Specify things that are NOT part of your research goals. You will then gain a more comprehensive picture of the issue that has some reasonable limits.

The matrix below might be helpful to use in this first stage.

FORMULATION OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

| | What we call it | What someone else might call it | Issues that may be associated with it | Issues to exclude from it |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Overall Problem or General Topic | | | | |
| Element 1 | | | | |
| Element 2 | | | | |
| Element 3 | | | | |

Step 2: Gather preliminary information

After reflecting on the question and its scope, the research process can start. This may involve hopping on the Web, heading to the library, or picking up your phone. In this phase, use the most cost-effective methods early (like a library search) and the more expensive ones (like interviews) later when you have narrowed the field to a few good prospects. Here are a few suggestions for this phase:

- Take a few minutes to think of people you know who may have information about the questions you are researching. Think of the conferences you've attended, recent contacts you've made, the people in your personal e-mail address book, etc. Send e-mail messages or call the people you think may know something themselves or may be able to direct you to someone else who does.
- Check with organizations that conduct best practices themselves to see if they have anything on the issue you are researching. Look at associations linked to the program area of your issue, i.e. professional associations that focus on government accounting, or social welfare, or environmental protection. Think of states, localities, or federal agencies with good reputations in the area of interest and check their Web sites or contact them. They might have implemented innovative solutions that you can learn from.
- Conduct a broad Internet search. Start with some of the major search engines using different keywords and word combinations. This is where that vocabulary expansion comes in handy. Once you have searched a topic, narrow your results by searching within the search results or formulating a more advanced query. Remember how easy it is to follow link after link as you pursue a lead until you have forgotten where you started. Have a pencil and paper handy and keep track of the sites you visit. Use the bookmark feature of your browser to easily return to the most useful ones later.
- Search the Internet to identify similar organizations solving similar problems. Try to take these examples apart

to see if the way you are thinking fits with the example, to verify that you are on track. Compare the example with the issue you are dealing with. Go on to find dissimilar organizations with similar problems-there is often a lot to be learned here. Finally, think about the technologies or management methods that might be useful in your project and search for organizations that are known to use them successfully. The key underlying concept here is "leverage." This kind of investigation is designed to leverage your research effort with known experience from a variety of other places.

The following matrix can be used when you are developing this strategy:

WHERE TO LOOK FOR LEVERAGE

| | Same Kind of Organization | Different Kind of Organization |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Same Problem | | |
| Different Problem but Promising Method or Technology | | |

Use the search results to identify knowledgeable people you should talk to. Most sites include contact information. Then contact these professionals by e-mail or phone.

Don't forget to search within the discussion groups of main search engines (such as Alta Vista) which provide this option to see if questions around your areas of interest have been debated within these groups.

- Join listservs . Look for a listserv corresponding to the subject you are researching. Subscribe to it and use this forum to ask who knows about or has had experience with your issue of interest. Regularly monitor lists that seem to provide good ongoing discussion of your topic.
- Conduct a literature search . Visit the reference desk of your local library and enlist the help of a reference librarian. There are likely to be a number of online and traditional resources that will lead you to publications of interest. Look at articles and corresponding bibliographies, pertinent to your research. Sometimes a good article can be a starting point as it may lead you to more material and other experts on your topic.

Step 3: Interview selected people in-depth

This kind of research is incomplete if it does not involve interviewing knowledgeable people identified during the information gathering stage. Written material tends to highlight the positives and gloss over the negatives of most stories. Consequently, it is very important to talk to people involved in the projects that interest you to get an insider's view. Fortunately, most public managers are very willing to share their knowledge with colleagues. It may be more difficult to identify and contact someone in the private sector, but it is worth a serious effort. The staff person (or team) conducting current and best practices research must not only have good research skills, but also good interviewing skills. Often, people assigned to conduct current and best practices research delay interviews as they often feel they need to know the topic thoroughly before they can talk to someone about it. This is not necessary and will delay the learning process-it is better to ask recognized experts about what they know than try to become an expert yourself.

A staff member conducting the current and best practices research should:

- Feel comfortable talking to people, and asking for help and advice.
- Be able to describe your project accurately, but briefly .
- Identify the right person to talk to. If the person you are talking to does not seem knowledgeable enough, asking to be directed to someone who knows more about the issue will save time and frustration on both sides.
- Ask targeted questions: "What do you know about...? Who in your organization knows about...? Can you tell me more about how you...?"
- Know how and when to ask difficult questions (usually about problems and failures).
- Have a standard method for documenting the interview results.

