

### Exemplary Practices as a Foundation for the Gateways Project Results

An important part of the design of this project was to base the analysis and results on as wide a range as possible of experience and existing knowledge. Therefore an early stage in the project consisted of research to identify and describe exemplary practices in providing electronic access to information. This research included examining the professional academic literature on this topic, exploring Web-based resources, and gathering data about exemplary practices in selected organizations. The literature and Web research led to the selection of 22 organizations in the government and private sectors that engaged in one or more exemplary practices that seemed worthy of further investigation. We arranged extensive interviews with professional staff in these agencies to elicit more detailed information about their practices and related issues. The results of these interviews provide the data on which this report is based.

The agencies selected for these interviews were deliberately chosen to represent a highly diverse sample of information access providers. The sample includes government agencies in the US, Europe, and New Zealand. It also includes academic and nonprofit organizations, with a wide range of missions and methods. Their access programs range from support for social science research, to advocacy for children, to regulation of the banking industry.<sup>(1)</sup> As a result of this diversity, the research brought to light two valuable kinds of result. First, the interviews documented important similarities in access issues and practices across very different organizations. Second, the results include descriptions of some very creative and effective practices that might not otherwise have been identified. These findings are described in more detail below.

Both the similarities and diversity in access programs seen in this research provided useful insights for the overall project. This research fed directly into the development of the dimension-based approach to program analysis and design presented in the full project report. These dimensions represent program design factors that were found to be important in the agencies participating in this research. The varied ways agencies dealt with these factors provided important information for understanding the dimensions and the role they play in electronic information access programs. In these exemplary practices can be seen many instances of how the appropriate matching of program features with information characteristics and users can produce effective and efficient access and information use.

### Data Collection and Analysis

A total of 22 organizations that provide electronic access were selected to participate in the interviews. They were selected on the basis of literature scans, Web site information, and recommendations of professionals in government and related organizations. Four organizations were selected for possible interviews. However, they either declined or were judged to be inappropriate after initial contacts.

All interviews were conducted by four experienced qualitative research staff on the telephone, using a common protocol and basic questions. These were semi-structured interviews using a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The interview protocol used a set of high-level questions to start the interviews, but allowed for the interview respondents to determine the sequence and depth in which topics were discussed. All interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the interviewee and verbatim transcripts were prepared for analysis. In some cases after reviewing transcripts, follow-up calls were made to the interviewees to check on responses or add information.

The interviews were analyzed by the interviewers working as a team. The purpose of the analysis was to extract descriptions of exemplary practices, why and how they were implemented, and the kinds of results produced. The team agreed on common methods to read and identify the desired material in the transcripts. They used a qualitative analysis software tool to work with electronic versions of the transcripts, marking selections of text with word codes to identify the specific information related to exemplary practices and their characteristics.<sup>(2)</sup> After working with a small set of transcripts, the team agreed upon a set of common codes to identify and characterize the practices across all interviews. Use of the common codes and software tool provided for consistent methods of analysis and easy sharing and comparisons of results. Using the software tool allowed for extracting the descriptions from the interviews and easily sorting and arranging them according to the various codes and descriptors used.

This kind of analysis also was used to identify information about the organizations themselves and how they operate their information access programs. While possessing many unique characteristics, the organizations examined displayed some consistent similarities. Based on these similarities the analysis team identified six types of organizations in terms of their goals, the kinds of programs they operate, and their linkages with users and

other organizations. Similarities and difference among the exemplary practices were also analyzed across these six types of organizations. The description of the organization types and related analysis of practices provide some additional insights into the relationships among access practices and the organizational contexts in which they operate.

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(1) A list of the participating agencies and contact information is listed in an appendix.

(2) The software tool was Atlas/ti. Each analyst had access to the application and was able to share results with the other team members using the features of the application. For additional description of these methods see [Strauss, 1990 #1] and [Kelle, 1997 #2].