Center for Technology in Government

Conducting Best and Current Practices Research: A Starter Kit

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Abstract

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Any issues facing your agency, no matter how unique they may seem, are likely to have occurred and been solved elsewhere. Best and current practices research is designed to help organizations learn from the experiences of others. You can discover what works and what doesn't, as well as how to replicate successes and avoid mistakes.

What Are Current And Best Practices And Why Do We Care?

People and organizations all over the world are looking for more effective, less expensive, innovative ways to get work done. Government is certainly no exception. For every innovative idea in your organization, you can be almost certain there is a kindred idea, and some relevant experience, somewhere else. Knowing about, understanding, and learning from these related endeavors can give you a head start on your own initiative.

In simplest terms, research into **current practice** is an organized attempt to learn from the experience of others. Any problem facing an agency, no matter how complex it may seem, is likely to have occurred elsewhere, be it in the public, private, or nonprofit sector. Identifying and evaluating the solutions developed by these other organizations is a crucial step in project planning. These experiences can shed light on what works-and what doesn't-in the earliest stages of your project development. The process by which you formulate your questions, identify likely sources of expertise, and probe for frank advice is what we call "current practices research."

The next step is to separate mistakes you shouldn't replicate from successes you'd like to emulate. In other words, zero in on effective or so-called **"best" practices** and look deeper into the characteristics that led to success. And don't discard the less-than-successful stories. They often have as much or more to teach as the ones with happy endings.

Conducting current and best practices research is critical to developing a full understanding of a problem and all of its components from multiple and varied perspectives. The time you spend reading and talking to people who have solved or tried to solve similar problems is likely to provide useful insights into underlying causes, strategies for change, and problems to expect along the way.

Current and best practices research is usually inexpensive and a good investment of your time. Unfortunately too many organizations skip it because they hold one or more false assumptions about their work. Do any of these sound familiar?

- There is no agency anywhere in the world like mine.
- This problem is totally unique and historically unprecedented.
- There is only one way to deal with this problem.
- We know more about this problem than anyone else.

It is very unlikely that any of these statements is true. In fact, quite the opposite.

Different Ways to Conduct Best & Current Practices Research

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.

Helpful Resources

In the following sections, we offer some advice about resources that we have found helpful in our own current and best practices research. The lists are far from exhaustive, but they do reflect resources that we have actually used and would use again.

Efficient Internet Search Engines

Using a search engine consists of entering keywords that are run against a database. As search engine databases vary in size, frequency of updates and search capabilities, using different engines can lead to results that vary considerably. The following sites are search engines that have very large databases and search capabilities and are most efficient in retrieving relevant and unique hits.

Northern Light: http://www.northernlight.com

Northern Light is both a free search engine and a fee database. In addition to searching the Web, it offers access to its special collection of more than 4,500 full text articles online for a minimum fee (usually $1). Northern Light is also very efficient in searching the Web and retrieving relevant results especially if you have a rather complex query. Moreover, it organizes the results of your search in folders according to type of documents, subject or sources.

Alta Vista: http://www.altavista.com

Alta Vista provides good returns due to its intricate searching capabilities and large database. It is efficient for complex or specific searches. Also, it is one of the few Web sites that provides hits from newsgroup discussions that can be very useful to best or current practice research. You can select to only search these newsgroups' discussions or messages.

Yahoo: http://www.yahoo.com

Yahoo has a collection of more than 500,000 sites pre-classified into more than 25,000 categories. It is a directory and not a search engine. Therefore it is very efficient for general or common searches. However, for more specific terms, Alta Vista or Northern Light are better.

Google: http://www.google.com

Google is a very comprehensive search engine; it ranks hits by the number of incoming links and the popularity of the sites. It is very efficient for searches with more than one word. It also features a special search engine solely for U.S. government documents; you can access **Uncle Sam** by typing: www.google.com/unclesam.

Hotbot: http://www.hotbot.com

Hotbot has unique and very user-friendly advanced search capabilities. You can filter your search by language, date (pages published within 2 weeks or 2 years), domain (retrieve only pages with a .com, .gov, or .edu domain), region (only U.S. pages for example), or you can filter out a particular word (should contain the word ... and not the word ...). Also you can type a url in the search box and click on "Look for links to this url" (box on the left) and Hotbot will retrieve for you all the Web pages that have a link to the url you typed.

MetaSearch Engines

Each individual search engine covers only about 4 to 20 percent of the Web. MetaSearch engines can provide more extensive coverage by searching simultaneously in several of the largest search engines' databases. MetaSearch engines are useful for a quick overview on what is available on the Web on a particular subject. The following are addresses of some efficient multi-threaded search engines:

Debriefing: http://www.debriefing.com

Searches for your query in Alta Vista, Excite, HotBot, Infoseek, Lycos, WebCrawler, and Yahoo. It then ranks the results by relevance indicating which search engine retrieved them. Debriefing also eliminates duplicate results from different search engines.

Dogpile: http://www.dogpile.com

Looks for results in 25 search engines, then displays them by search engines, from most specific to most general result.

Profusion: http://www.profusion.com

Uses up to nine search engines and allows you to select the ones you want to be searched.

Ask Jeeves: http://www.askjeeves.com

You can type a question and Jeeves will try to provide you the answer by looking in several search engines. It will group the results by engine as well as by the sites who seem to provide answers closer to your question.

Specialized Subject Search Engines

These search engines act as clearinghouses on a wide array of specific subjects. They usually consist of guides compiled by subject experts on relevant resources to particular topics. The following are some of the clearinghouses that can help you retrieve relevant information:

The Argus Clearinghouse: http://www.clearinghouse.net

The Argus Clearinghouse features 13 main categories, such as information technology, education, government and law, social science, etc., divided in sub-categories that lead you to information related to particular topics.

The WWW Virtual Library: http://www.vlib.org

The WWW Virtual Library is also organized by subjects. The information provided on a particular topic

includes bibliographies, Web sites, listservs, and research papers.

Tips for an Efficient Search

The results you get from a search on the Web are only as good as your query. By using the following tips to write a query, you may get more targeted and useful results:

Quotation Marks

If you are looking for an exact phrase or group of words such as *American Marketing Association* for example, make sure to use quotation marks: "American Marketing Association." Otherwise, the engine will search every word separately.

AND

Use AND (uppercase) when you want to make sure your results contain two terms. If you use AND in your query, the search engine will retrieve only documents that contain both words.

OR

Search your subject with different synonyms to maximize your chances of getting results. Using OR (uppercase) will allow you to enter several synonyms for the search engine to look at as it will retrieve either of the words you typed.

+Sign

Some search engines will ignore and not search short words included in a query such as: *in, of, a, out, with.* Using the plus sign will ensure that all words are searched for. For example if your search is: *Women in Government* , make sure to type: *+women +in +government.*

-Sign

Use the minus sign if you want to make sure your results do not contain a certain word. For example, if you are looking for information on *Marketing Strategy* but do not want to get results from consulting companies, you can type: *+Marketing +Strategy-Consulting*

***Sign**

You can use the star sign to truncate a word. For example, if you are looking for *Marketing consultants* or *Marketing consulting companies* , you can type: *+marketing +consult** and the search engine will retrieve results with any word starting with *consult.*

Combination

You can use a combination of signs or words to do your search by putting terms in parenthesis. For example, you can type (American or U.S.) AND presidency.

Doing a Literature Search

Library databases

The University at Albany/SUNY has a large collection of databases available to its users. Most academic libraries and large public libraries do as well. The following are some very useful databases to get an idea of what has been written on a particular subject in the literature. Very often, these databases provide online full text articles or abstracts.

JSTOR

is a full text article database in the fields of economy, finance, education, mathematics, sociology, and political science. You can select which journals you want to search. All the full text articles are available to download in pdf (portable document format).

EBSCO

covers business, humanities, news, science and social sciences. It offers a few full text articles and abstracts. You can find many recent articles as the database is updated daily.

UnCover Reveal

has a small annual subscription fee of $25. However, it is the only database that does the work for you. You simply submit keywords to Uncover Reveal. It will then search journal citations and tables of contents matching your request and send them to your e-mail address on a weekly basis.

Public Affairs Information Service Bulletin

(PAIS) is a database of journals, books and government reports, in all languages. The search capabilities allow you to combine multiple keywords for relevant returns. The results include abstracts of articles as well as links to where the articles can be found on the Web.

Article 1 st

is a database of journals in science, technology, social science, business, and the humanities. The results indicate which library owns the articles but do not provide online abstracts or articles.

Contents 1 st

allows you to browse through the table of contents of many journals.

Access Online to Published Literature

A few sites on the Web act as "digital libraries" at no fee. The following sites provide search capabilities as well as retrieval of full text articles.

Wiley InterScience: http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/ journalfinder.html

Wiley InterScience provides online abstracts and full texts of journals in the fields of business, finance and management, information and computer science, education, law, and psychology. You first need to register with Wiley InterScience which takes two minutes and is free. Then you have two services available:

1. Journal finder, where you can browse the current issues of many journals and look at their table of contents. If an article is of interest, you can download its full text as a pdf file; and
2. Simple search, where you can enter a keyword or sentence and search for it in all the journals online or in the journals of your choice.

You can also download the full text of your results.

Educational Resources Information Center/IT Clearinghouse: http://www.askeric.org/ithome

ERIC/IT is one of 16 clearinghouses in the ERIC system. It specializes in library and information science and educational technology. AskERIC is a Web-based interface for searching the ERIC database that is free to use and is updated monthly. It allows you to search using several keywords and provides you with abstracts.

Useful Bookmarks

The following Web sites often cite exemplary practices and programs and may be a good starting point for seeking out public sector examples.

Government Solutions/Innovations

If you are doing best/current practice research regarding innovative government solutions in different program areas, you may want to visit the following Web sites that are mostly dedicated to innovations and best governance practices.

Best of Practice Government Solutions: http://www.gol.org/bestof.html

This Web site presents government solutions in several program areas: technology, finance, public safety, WWW servers, etc. You can either select a state and browse through its government solutions or select a program area and see which states tackled it. The information on a government solution implemented a state is presented according to the following outline: issue, solution, and results. Contact information is also provided.

National Center for Public Productivity: http://newark.rutgers.edu/~ncpp

The National Center for Public Productivity is a research and public service organization devoted to assist federal, state, and local governments improve the delivery of quality services. The Web site contains exemplary state and local programs, best practices worldwide, and many publications.

Alliance for Redesigning Government: http:www.alliance.napawash.org/alliance/index.html

The Alliance for Redesigning Government was established at the National Academy of Public Administration in 1993, as part of the well-known Reinventing Government program. The Alliance is the center of a national network and clearinghouse for state, local, and federal innovators who advocate performance-based, results- driven government operations. The Web site contains case studies, synopses of relevant books and articles, and access to online discussions.

Council of State Governments: http://www.csg.org/csg/default

The Council of State Governments was created in 1933 to provide state officials with the tools and strategies necessary to implement effective policies and programs. The Web site contains publications, handbooks, contact information, innovation award winners, and other information on effective state governance.

Innovations in American Government:
http://www.innovations.harvard.edu/content.cfm?CFID=66589&CFTOKEN=86851000&flashInstalled=1

The Kennedy School at Harvard and the Ford Foundation sponsor the Innovations program to highlight exemplary programs to solve important public problems at every level of government.

National Governors Association: http://www.nga.org

The NGA Center for Best Practices, whose mission is to identify and share the states' best practices and innovations, maintains an index of key state issues covering many program areas that you can browse online.

National Association of State Chief Information Officers: http://www.nascio.org

NASCIO represents state chief information officers and information resource executives and managers from the 50 states. Its mission is to address opportunities and challenges of improving the business of government through the application of information technology. The Web site presents best practices in the use of information technology in states, as well as numerous publications. In addition, it features StateSearch, a comprehensive directory of information technology and management initiatives in state governments.

International City/County Management Association: http://www.icma.org

ICMA's two-fold mission is to enhance the quality of local government and to support and assist professional local government managers and administrators. Toward that end, the association develops and publishes a vast array of publications and reference material to help improve the process of local government management. ICMA also serves as a major clearinghouse for the collection, analysis and dissemination of information and data about local government.

Public Technology, Inc: http://pti.nw.dc.us/

Created in 1971, PTI is a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the use of technology in both cities and counties. The Web site features PTI publications which demonstrate the "best technology practices" of cities and counties in the U.S.

Information Technology Solutions

If you are looking for a technology solution, the following Web sites are a good starting point:

Planet IT: http://www.planetit.com

Planet IT is an online community of IT executives who collaborate, exchange ideas, and share information on technology and business solutions. In addition to providing information on a wide array of IT issues classified in 17 categories, Planet IT offers the opportunity for online discussions with IT professionals, access to expert opinion and advice, as well as product reviews and market trends.

ISWorld: http://www.isworld.org

ISWorld strives to be a single entry point to resources related to information systems technology and a link to the global community of information management scholars and practitioners. The Web site provides worldwide examples, explanations, discussions, and contact information related to information technology.

Association for Computing Machinery: http://info.acm.org

Founded in 1947, ACM is the world's first educational and scientific computing society. ACM publishes, distributes, and archives original research and firsthand perspectives from the world's leading thinkers in computing and information technologies. ACM offers over two dozen publications. The Web site allows you to search the ACM library online.

Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences: http://www.informs.org

INFORMS represents professionals in the fields of operations research and management sciences. INFORMS publishes 10 professional journals. The Web site contains a searchable database of all the journals, conference papers, as well as PowerPoint presentations. The site also offers the opportunity for online discussion.

Publications to Browse

Academic journals and trade publications are good sources of information about all kinds of practices and technologies. The trade publications give you the best source of truly current developments; the journals offer more rigorously tested conclusions. You will probably need to visit an academic library for past issues of most journals.

Government/Public Administration

Civic.com: http://www.fcw.com/geb/

Government Technology: http://www.govtech.net

Governing: http://www.governing.com

Public Administration Review

Public Productivity Management Review

Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory

CIO Magazine: http://www.cio.com

Public Administration and Management: http://www.pamij.com

Technology Related

DBMS: http://www.dbmsmag.com/index.shtml

DB2: http://www.db2mag.com/

ACM: http://info.acm.org

MIS Quarterly: http://misq.org

DM Review: http://www.dmreview.com

ZD Net: http://www.zdnet.com

Decision Sciences Journal: http://www.decisionsciences.org/dsj/index.htm

Management Related

Academy of Management Journal: http://aom.pace.edu/amjnew/

Academy of Management Review: http://www.aom.pace.edu/amr/

Harvard Business Review: http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b02/en/hbr/hbr_home.jhtml;jsessionid=CDEHDTZ14J0TICTEQENSELQ?_

Journal of Management: http://journalofmanagement.moore.sc.edu/

Listservs You Can Join

Government/Public Administration

NASPA: http://www.naspa.org

To subscribe to the listserv, send an e-mail message to Listserv@asu.edu In the message write the following: subscribe naspa6 YourFirstName YourLastName.

APPAM: http://qsilver.queensu.ca/~appamwww/

To subscribe to the listserv, send an e-mail to: listserv@post.queensu.ca. In the body of your message, type the following: SUBSCRIBE APPAM-L your_real_name

You can also subscribe online to the following listservs:

GOVPUB: http://listserv.nodak.edu/scripts/wa.exe?SUBED1=govpub&A=1

NASCIO: http://www.nascio.org

ASPA: http://www.aspanet.org

Technology Related

You can register online for the listservs below:

ISWorld: http://www.isworld.org

DCI News: http://news.dci.com/signup.htm

Also, in order to find a listserv dealing with one of the topics you are researching, go to this Web site: http://www.ittools.com/

Professional Associations You Can Contact

Public Administration

American Society for Public Administration: http://www.aspanet.org

International City/County Management Association: http://www.icma.org National Association of Counties: http://www.naco.org

National Governors Association: http://www.nga.org

National Conference of State Legislatures: http://www.ncsl.org

National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators: http://www.nagara.org

Information Technology/Management

Association of Information Technology Professionals: http://aitp.org

Association for Computing Machinery: http://www.acm.org

Association for Information Systems: http://www.aisnet.org

Association of Records Managers & Administrators: http://www.arma.org

American Society for Information Science: http://www.asis.org

Data Management Association: http://www.dama.org

International Academy for Information Management: http://www.iaim.org

International Association for Management Technology: http://www.iamot.org

Information Resources Management Association: http://www.irma-international.org

Society for Information Management: http://www.simnet.org

