

# Introduction

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*This guide contains basic technical information for understanding the Internet and its resources, along with detailed advice for getting started. Some chapters contain more advanced information (for example, Chapter 6, "Creating a Presence on the Internet") that may not be easily accessible to beginners. If the terms are unfamiliar to you, refer to the glossary in Appendix A. However, because the Internet is a vast and diverse resource for communication and information access, project directors are encouraged to use the information in this guide as a springboard for launching their own online adventures. Welcome to the information superhighway!*

Over the past 10 years, the Internet has gone from an obscure academic tool to a household word. Once limited to universities and the military, users of the Internet now include rapidly increasing numbers of small businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, and individuals of all ages. The reason for this growing popularity and the resulting attention from the media is that the Internet is fulfilling its promise to revolutionize how we access information and communicate.

Beyond the current hype and concern surrounding the Internet lies a powerful resource that can put national service participants and organizations in touch with related programs and information throughout the country (and the world). The Internet makes

distant colleagues, funding information, policy reports, and pending legislation accessible from a desktop computer at your home or office. People from all over the country and the world are enriching their personal and professional lives through ongoing discussions concerning issues like literacy, disabilities, and homelessness (to name just a few). Never before has a technological tool so immediately and directly empowered people from all walks of life.

And despite the high-tech sound of it, using the Internet is affordable, requiring only a computer, modem, a regular phone line, and an Internet service provider. The largest and most important investment an organization must make is time—to learn about the technology, to assess its own needs, and to develop and implement a realistic organization-wide plan.

**Myth:**

*The Internet is too expensive for a small nonprofit.*

**Fact:**

The Internet is cheap, and the low cost of Internet access is often offset by savings in long-distance phone calls, postage, and photo copying.

**Myth:**

*I've already talked to so many people today; it would take more time if I talked to the rest of the world, too.*

**Fact:**

E-mail is efficient. Instead of interruptions and "phone tag," you can receive quick electronic notes and reply when you have a minute and an answer.

*The largest investment an organization must make is time—time to learn about the technology, to assess its own needs, and to develop and implement a realistic organization-wide plan.*

This guide provides an introduction to learning about the resources available through the Internet and how they can be used within an organization. People new to the field of Internet communication should work through the chapters in sequence to gain both knowledge and experience before making Internet plans for their organization. Those who are already experienced with online services may want to skip around, focusing on the advanced technical information in Chapter 6.

As you venture onto the Internet, keep in mind that you are entering an “electronic community” of millions of participants. Like the community in which you now serve, the online world has its own set of informal rules and traditions that are not always apparent to a newcomer. The Internet hosts a rich community of diverse people—your ideas and experiences will be a valuable contribution to this global community. (See Chapter 9, “The Online World,” for more specifics about Internet culture.)

The Internet and related online services should be regarded as an additional resource to use in the efforts to “address unmet human needs.” Used properly, and in combination with more traditional forms of capacity-building, online resources will make organizations more effective.

## CHAPTER 1:

# What Is the Internet?

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*This section is a brief primer on the Internet and the various tools that help organize the vast information available online. Learning about the Internet is a process of self-education and hands-on exploration. In addition to following along with this guide, beginners are urged to pick up a comprehensive Internet reference book (see Appendix C) to supplement the topics covered here.*

## A Brief History

The Internet evolved from a Defense Department project in the 1960s called ARPANET, which linked university computers to enable information sharing and to protect military communications and information from a nuclear attack. A standard computer language or protocol was created so that a vast network of diverse computers could communicate with each other. Use of this computer network was limited to university researchers throughout the 1970s, and tools like electronic mail and file transfers were developed to help distant colleagues work together and access each other's information.

By the 1980s, personal computers began appearing in many nonacademic settings like homes and offices, and by the 1990s demand was strong enough that other kinds of information networks were created, such as online library catalogs and commercial services like CompuServe and America Online. These smaller networks originally offered access to specific information or services unique to their systems. Now they, along with many other Internet service providers, offer access to the full range of information, services, and resources available on the Internet.

As more and more of the general public "get online," new tools are being created to make accessing the information contained on the Internet much easier. Access to the Internet is no longer confined to the university elite, and consumers have numerous services to choose from, varying in price and level of access.

While it has grown and evolved rapidly in recent years, the two primary functions of the Internet—communication and information

## ***Primary Internet Functions & Tools***

### **Communication**

- E-mail
- Listservs
- Newsgroups
- Instant Relay Chat

### **Information Access**

- World Wide Web
- FTP
- Telnet

### **Electronic Publication**

- World Wide Web

access—remain the same. Now any business, organization, or individual can use the Internet to communicate, advertise, sell a product, and publish information using e-mail and the World Wide Web.

## **What Is the Internet?**

While you can't really see or touch the Internet, it is not mysterious or magical. To get a picture of the Internet, think of another tool you probably use every day—your telephone. While most of us don't understand exactly how the phone system works, we do have a basic concept of how it functions. When you make a telephone call, you are using a network of telephone lines and routing devices that connect a person in one location to someone in another location. The telephone is the tool you use to direct the call and then send your voice and receive the voice of the person on the other end.

The Internet is very similar. It is simply a network of computers and routing devices that are connected by data transmission lines, including some of the very same lines that you use when you talk on the phone. Instead of a telephone, the tool you use to send and receive information is your computer, which is connecting to another computer somewhere on the Internet. When you send or receive an e-mail message or open a web page, you are simply connecting to another computer on the Internet and sending or receiving information between your computer and another computer.

## **Getting Started**

Now that you know the basics about what the Internet is, read on to find out what resources the Internet can offer you, and the tools and methods to access those resources.