

CHAPTER 5:

Developing a Telecommunications Plan

If you have worked through Chapters 1 to 4, congratulations! Now that you're on your way to becoming an Internet expert, it's time to consider how this resource can be applied to your organization as a whole. To start evaluating how the Internet fits into your organization, keep these two questions in mind:

- 1. How can Internet resources meet your organization's existing communication and information needs?*
- 2. Are there new opportunities for your organization that are made possible through telecommunications?*

Meeting Your Organization's Needs

Communication needs — Does your organization want/need another, possibly cheaper method of communicating, besides phone, fax, or mail? Does your organization want/need to share ideas or concerns with other national service programs? Are you a multi-site program? Or how about linking up with affiliated organizations within the state or region? If you answered "yes" to any of these, list and discuss your ideas, getting as specific as possible. E-mail and listservs are the communication tools of choice, but you will need to determine who needs an account, where they will be located, and what service(s) provide the best access to the tools you want.

Information needs — In addition to the information gathered during online discussions, does your organization need/want faster access to grant information, legislation, policy reports and research, and free software? Does your organization want to make its own information available to the public online? What tasks that you do now (library research, long-distance calls) can be replaced by online searches and information retrieval? The tool of choice is the web. Since the web is not as personal as e-mail, a single account can be shared among an entire organization, or nearby offices.

Organizational buy-in — Educate your organization about the resources available through the Internet, beginning with your supervisor. Keep the jargon and the hype to a minimum when explaining it to other staff, and try to work in specific examples of resources

that will help make their job easier. Identify who is coordinating the overall effort and how much of that person's time can be officially devoted to the project. Develop specific telecommunications goals based on input from the entire staff and consistent with the overall mission of the agency.

Training — Assess the general computer literacy of the staff, and integrate Internet training into any existing staff training plan. Posting a list called "Treasures Found on the Internet" on an office bulletin board and leading staff on occasional Internet tours (called "safaris") during lunch hours are fun ways to build both knowledge and enthusiasm. Try to identify specific staff needs by listening to their concerns and frustrations as they begin their online explorations.

Equipment — Make a tally of existing equipment and compare it to what you'll need. Consider where usable phone lines are located, and how reshuffling of office furniture could make the most of a limited number of computers. Compile a list of equipment that you'll need to purchase or have donated. Consult with the experts at the National Service Resource Center (see Chapter 4) if you are having trouble assessing your equipment needs.

Budget — Avoid surprise costs down the road by making thorough estimates of all potential costs. Include the cost of additional equipment, extra phone lines, maintenance, and online service charges—even budget for the cost of books.

Preparing for Electronic Publication

The details about preparing for electronic publication on the World Wide Web are provided in Chapter 6, "Creating a Presence on the Internet." Here are some basics that beginners need to know.

Building a website — Electronic publication of your organization's information can be complex or simple, depending on your time, skills, needs, and resources. You may be able to recruit a volunteer student or Internet professional to help design and build a website.

Prepare your material — Whether you are using e-mail or the web, it's a good idea to have ASCII text copies of your promotional materials available. ASCII is a universal text format that all computer systems can read, and it's the preferred "language" for online information. Nearly all word processors have the option of saving a

document in ASCII format (many software programs call this a “text only” format). With your word processor file open, choose “Save As” from the File pull-down menu. In the dialogue box that opens, you can choose the file type or format. Be sure to change the name of your file so you don’t overwrite the original with your text-only version.

Consider the organizational changes — Many organizations underestimate the amount of time and resources that must be committed to maintaining online information. Consider who will respond to the phone calls and possible e-mail messages that are generated from your online information. Some of the inquiries may be from out of state or other countries. Who will be responsible for keeping the material updated, removing old notices, and replacing them with new ones? What department in your organization will be responsible for the information?

Find a host — In order to put up a website, you need someone to host the files on their web server. Setting up your own server is fairly technical, expensive, and time-consuming. You can probably find an Internet service provider (ISP) that provides web server space as part of its basic service. Local community networks may be willing to host your information on their server for free. Local ISPs may also donate space on their server—look in the phone book under “Computers: online services,” or ask at a local computer store.