ABSTRACT
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approach to information-seeking and contains guidelines and examples
for specific applications. It is organized in five major sections and
includes a discussion of the following topics: (1)
information-searching as detective work; (2) framing an information
search; (3) developing an information search plan and defining the
information wanted, choosing a search method, and deciding who will
conduct the search; (4) conducting the information search, and
avoiding information sources, avoiding false leads, and collecting
and organizing information; and (5) assessing the results of an
information search. (Author/MLF)

Keys to Community Involvement Series

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KEYS TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

FINDING THE "RIGHT" INFORMATION:
A SEARCH STRATEGY

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE SERIES

Keys to Community Involvement is a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators and citizens. The booklets are designed to help these audiences strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects.

The booklets are written by members of the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratory is a nonprofit, educational research and development corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States.

Information about other booklets in this series--titles and how to order--as well as information about related services-- training, workshops and consultation--can be found on the inside and outside back covers of this booklet.

INTRODUCTION

Whether it is needed for long-range planning or immediate problem solving, information is inevitably critical to community groups and leaders. Despite the wealth of data available, the search for information that is pertinent, specific and up-to-date is often an exercise in frustration and frequently a gesture of futility.

This booklet is for individuals and groups who are faced with a need for finding the "right" information for discussion and decision making. The booklet describes an overall approach to information seeking and contains guidelines and examples for specific applications. It is organized in five major sections and includes a discussion of the following topics:

- Information searching as detective work

- Framing an information search

- Developing an information search plan

    Defining the information you want
    Choosing a search method
    Deciding who will conduct the search

- Conducting the information search

  Finding information sources
  Avoiding false leads
  Collecting and organizing information

- Assessing the results of your information search

INFORMATION SEARCHING AS DETECTIVE WORK

Before launching into the actions and activities of a search, it is important to consider attitude towards the search. The experiences of Rural Education Program staff members and colleagues at Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, as well as other experts from the information sciences[1] have led us to believe that searching for information is much like detective work.

You begin with a partially described problem, start listening to those who know anything about it, try to verify all information by another source, most likely reshape the problem two or three times, keep on tracing leads, and finally begin to formulate hypotheses and test them against known evidence.

What's important about attitude in this investigative process is that judgment and intuition become equal partners with logic and reason. Communication of intention and opinion may often be as important as scientific fact. And what appears on paper to be a straightforward sequence of events may take loops and whirls as you talk to people, review newspaper editorials and try to make sense of two or more conflicting pieces of information.

Therein lies the challenge of search work--and the fun of it!

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FRAMING THE INFORMATION SEARCH

The information needs faced by most community groups are practical and immediate, and geared for subsequent action. A group may be responsible for investigating a local problem such as vandalism. The actions may be to formulate a series of options to deal with such issues or to recommend adoption or not of a specific measure. In any of these cases, it is important for the group to agree on its purpose, to share common expectations for the search and to be aware of any restrictions or limitations on the search, as well as resources that will be available for it.

A simple yet exacting procedure for a group to use in reaching these agreements is to write them down and refine the statements until everyone is satisfied, including the person or agency to whom the group is responsible. Sample Worksheet 1 is included at the back of this booklet for your use. Feel free to adapt it and the other worksheets included to suit your own purposes.

In writing purpose statements, the focus should be on the individual's or group's actions and responsibilities. When listing expectations, the emphasis should be on results. For example:

Purpose:

To recommend affirmative or negative action to the County Board of Commissioners on the proposal to close all county parks at the hour of 8:00 pm.

Expectations for the Information Search:

1. Knowledge of the problems (rowdiness, drinking after dark) which resulted in the proposal

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2. Knowledge of what other communities have done in response to the problem and how effective their action has been

3. Knowledge of how the proposal, if approved, would affect the community at large

4. Knowledge of how the proposal, if approved, would affect the problem

Restrictions to and resources for the search should also be discussed by the group when purpose and expectations are being considered, since constraints such as cost and time weigh heavily on the kind of search you can make and the results you can expect of it. Again, listing these constraints and resources is a good way to clarify expectations for the search and begin to shape what kind of search can be conducted. For example:

Constraints	Resources
Recommendation due in 3 weeks	Good library and information services available
No money for travel out of county	WATS telephone line
No money for reimbursement for people's time	County car and office space

With this framework in place, you should be ready to outline a search plan and negotiate individual responsibilities for search tasks.

DEVELOPING AN INFORMATION SEARCH PLAN

Three kinds of decisions are part of developing a search plan. First, keeping in mind your constraints and resources, decide the type of information you wish to

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collect--its nature, its quantity, its detail and its format. Second, select the means of inquiry you will use. And third, select the person or people to conduct the search.

WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION DO YOU WANT?

Using the search expectations and limitations already defined, consider the kinds of information that will meet those specifications.

- *Nature of information*--Do you want the opinion of recognized experts on the problem? Or descriptions of activities other communities initiated to resolve similar difficulties? Or research studies on the "root causes" of the problem you are dealing with? Or first-hand opinions from local people who are involved with or affected by the issue? Or a mix of all these?

- *Quantity of information*--Will a sampling of the information available be adequate at this time? Or do you want many examples? Do you want only those plans that worked, or can you learn as much from those that didn't? (Forewarned may be forearmed!)

- *Detail of information*--Will a general survey of, for example, zoning patterns in your region be sufficient information? Or will you need information about each specific category of zoning, as well as about common variances and exceptions to each? Do you need to know which individuals and groups most influence public opinion about your issue?

- *Format of information*--Will "hands-on" materials such as procedure manuals be more helpful than a comprehensive bibliography, or <u>vice versa</u>? Will letters from experts addressing your issue be more useful than their research reports? Can you use films or videotapes?

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Answers to these questions (and others you may add) will help you or your group reach a solid definition of your information needs. Sample Worksheet 2 at the back of this booklet can be used to record agreements about the focus of your search. More than one worksheet may be needed if several expectations for the search have been stated.

WHICH SEARCH METHOD SHOULD YOU USE?

Three basic paths are open to information searchers: gathering first-hand data, using interpersonal networks and using libraries and information systems. Each has advantages and disadvantages, none is superior by itself in all situations, and a good search will likely employ elements from all three.

Gathering first-hand data is, surprisingly, the most neglected means of finding up-to-date information pertinent to a specific concern. Do you want to know why a much-touted ballot measure was defeated? Ask the people who voted and didn't vote. Do you want to know if your community's water supply has been affected by clearcutting timber in the watershed area? Arrange for samples to be collected and compare them with samples taken prior to the clearcutting. Do you want to assess living conditions in seasonal migrant camps or a run-down section in your city? Go visit them, talk to the residents, and make your own assessment.

Questions that solicit public opinion, that can be answered matter-of-factly or which focus on local happenings are most amenable to first-hand data collection. Questions that require a broad historical perspective, solicit expert theory or ask for tangible materials probably cannot be answered satisfactorily using this tactic.*

* For a detailed discussion of collecting community data, see the booklet in this series entitled, "Community Surveys: Grassroots Approaches."

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Using interpersonal networks is also often overlooked in favor of more "researchy" efforts at the library. Yet interviewing and questioning are powerful means of finding good information quickly. You can begin by assessing your own or your group's own knowledge about the issue at hand; proceed from there to others you identify as having pertinent information or who may know specialists in the field; and continue with letters, phone calls or visits to those persons and their contacts until you or the group is satisfied with the information collected.* Such information does need to be checked to insure that all major schools of thought are included, but it has the advantages of built-in synthesis and judgment as well as direct application to your needs.

Using libraries and information systems, including those maintained by newspapers and private organizations, can provide the greatest quantity of information for you or your group. Reference librarians and information specialists are usually available to help direct you to useful sources of information and may in fact assume responsibility for searching the resources they have available. Whether you or they do the actual searching, this is the time to refer to your earlier agreements in order to winnow the vast amount of information to manageable proportions. The biggest frustration in using libraries and information systems is that the categorization schema they employ almost <u>never</u> match the framework of ideas and problems people bring to them; this mismatch may produce a high proportion of not-quite-relevant information.[2]

Exhibit 1 presents some advantages and disadvantages of each search method. After adding other items that describe your unique conditions, you or your group should be able to ascertain the utility of each method for your information needs and decide whether or not to use one or all three and in what order.

This initial choice may be modified later, of course, as the search is carried out and one line of inquiry proves fruitless or (with luck) bountiful.

* For more information see the series booklet entitled, "Using Consultants: Getting What You Want."

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Methods	Advantages	Disadvantages
Gathering first-hand data	Provides direct response to particular question Provides current data	May take too much time and effort to gather information and process it into a useful form Doesn't account for past experience or expert opinion
Using inter-personal networks	Usually inexpensive Usually quick Includes judgment as well as fact	May include bias Hard to collect detailed information
Using libraries and information systems	Help usually available Great quantity of information accessible Detailed information readily available	May produce irrelevant information Current ideas may not yet be in system Selecting the most appropriate library or information center may be difficult

Advantages and Disadvantages of Three Search Methods

Exhibit 1: Advantages and Disadvantages of Three Search Methods

WHO SHOULD CONDUCT THE INFORMATION SEARCH?

The first choice in this matter is between you or your group and someone else, possibly a staff person from an agency your group is affiliated with or a librarian, information specialist or a consultant you might hire.

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If your decision is to turn the search over to another person, you will still want to designate one person in your group, to define details of the search with the searcher, to receive the information as it comes in and to keep in communication with the searcher. If your decision is to undertake the work yourself, think of the skills and characteristics that would be important for a person using each of the search methods described earlier to have; then parcel out the tasks accordingly. An incomplete list of such characteristics and skills is presented in Exhibit 2. After considering the list, you or your group may want to add your own ideas to it.

Characteristics and Skills Useful in Conducting a Search	
Method	Helpful Characteristics and Skills
Gathering first-hand data	• Planning, organizing and coordinating • Locating resources • Writing questionnaires or interview schedules • Arranging visits • Synthesizing large amounts of data into usable form
Using inter-personal networks	• Comfortable on telephone or in person with strangers • Not intimidated by refusals or unhelpful responses • Good letter writer • Good questioning tactics • Divergent, imaginative thinker
Using libraries and information systems	• Ability to quickly sort appropriate from inappropriate materials • Skill in using catalogs and other reference works • Ability to keep on track • Awareness of the wide variety of information systems and libraries that exist

Exhibit 2: Characteristics and Skills Useful in
Conducting a Search

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CONDUCTING THE INFORMATION SEARCH

As your search actually begins, you or your group will be involved in locating information sources, as well as collecting and organizing information. These topics, plus some clues on avoiding false leads as you go, are discussed in the following paragraphs.

WHERE SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR INFORMATION?

No matter what your search method, a good answer to this question is, "Start in your own community." The typical sources of information available in most communities are listed below.

For identifying people or groups, try:

- City directories

- Telephone books and operators

- Newspaper stories and letters to the editor

- Radio and television reports and commentaries

- Notices of public meetings or forums

- Reference works in the library

Groups or organizations that often collect and store community information include:

- Municipal agencies

- Local units of county, state or federal agencies

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- Schools, public and private, and related organizations like a teachers' union or PTA

- Community colleges, junior colleges, colleges and universities

- Newspapers, radio stations, television stations

- Chamber of Commerce and other business groups

- Fraternal organizations such as the Lions Club, Rotary Club, Women's Club, etc.

- Civic organizations such as the League of Women Voters or World Affairs Council

- Political organizations, including Democratic and Republican parties

- Church groups with an interest in community affairs

- Advocacy groups such as Parents Anonymous or the National Organization of Women

- Professional groups such as the American Medical Association and Business and Professional Women

- Local arms of national networks such as the Cooperative Extension Service

Libraries can offer several kinds of assistance:

- General reference works, including indexes and abstracting services

- Telephone directories from outside the local area

- Works on local history and current affairs information

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- Bibliographic reviews of journals and research

- Guides to human and institutional resources

- Journals and periodicals, newspapers and pamphlets; indexes to these

- A community human resources file

In addition, the library may have access to computerized information retrieval services or indexing and abstracting services useful in a comprehensive search.

When you are satisfied that local sources are not adequate for your purpose, expand the search to your county, region, state and so on. Use the clues you have picked up locally to pursue people whose articles you've read or ideas that can be tracked through a national research service. For example, a new land planning scheme in South Carolina that the local Cooperative Extension Service agent mentioned can be traced to its source and further information obtained.

HOW CAN YOU AVOID FOLLOWING FALSE LEADS?

Of all the frustrations in investigation, none is worse than following what appears to be a productive line of inquiry, only to discover half way along that apples are growing on the tree instead of the oranges you were looking for. How can you prevent this from happening?

1. Keep your purpose and expectations for the search clearly in mind at all times. Remember why you're doing this, and be prepared to explain it to others repeatedly, in conversation and in writing.

2. Keep alert to the fact that the meaning of questions will often be lost as questions are rephrased to mesh with information classification systems; help the

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librarian or information specialist or consultant by discussing in detail your search purpose, the context of the search and the results you want.

3. Keep alert to the fact that words themselves take on different or special meanings in various fields of endeavor; check and recheck to make sure you're still on track with your information sources.

HOW CAN YOU COLLECT AND ORGANIZE YOUR INFORMATION?

Your search method will determine to some degree the manner in which you collect information, but in each case there are options to choose from. In collecting first-hand data, options include telephone interview, person-to-person interview, written questionnaires, public meetings with an official minutes-taker and so on. When using interpersonal networks, notetaking or tape recording* can be employed, along with a request for written correspondence as confirmation. A search of libraries and information systems can result in written notes, photocopies of articles, computer printouts and purchased materials.

In cases where you or other persons are taking notes, it is helpful to have a standardized format, so that you collect all of the needed information the first time around. This procedure makes it easier to compare information across sources later on. Sample Worksheet 3 at the end of this booklet provides one such format for your use or adaptation. This particular format requires the recorder to synthesize the information and to evaluate its ultimate usefulness as well as simply recording the data. If a standard interview schedule or questionnaire is used, then a tally sheet or other compilation sheet will be more useful.

* Courtesy and the law require that all parties give their consent to tape recording.

A good precaution is to retain as many complete sources of information (books, journals, verbatim transcriptions, etc.) as possible, so that the context of the information you present can always be verified if needed. This is called documentation and can save your project!

A number of convenient ways to store information are readily available at low cost. Index cards and boxes (3x5 or 5x7) are good for keeping the names of people and reference sources you find useful. A file box or drawer can hold correspondence, papers, journal articles, photographs, diagrams, newspaper clippings and so on. A small bookshelf may also prove handy for directories, catalogs and other printed materials.

Organizing data around major topics is easiest for most people, with the topics marked on dividers and arranged alphabetically in whatever filing system you have. Topics should be the same in each part of the filing system. Each piece of material filed should be marked in a consistent manner with the name of the topic to which it has been assigned.

If topics are closely related, you may want to cross-reference some items; an extra card or sheet of paper to that effect will do just fine. In any event, a master list of all items in your file should be updated with every entry into the file, so that any particular item can always be located without an exhaustive physical search.

ASSESSING THE RESULTS OF YOUR SEARCH

The many mid-course corrections you make as you proceed with your search are one kind of assessment; these should be based on the quality and quantity of information (or lack of it) you receive from each of your inquiries. Using this "feedback" as clues, you may find yourself or your group refining the expectations you have for the search, the method of inquiry you are using, the nature of information

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you are soliciting, or even the purpose of your search as originally stated. Don't fret about such revisions. Congratulate yourself; abstract ideas are beginning to be shaped by reality, and those are the search results that will help make an impact as you use them.

Another type of assessment occurs at the end of a search, when you want to summarize the work that was done and its results. Three questions are useful to initiate a discussion of the search:

- What did we do, and how would we change it the next time? (the process)

- What were the findings of our search efforts, were they satisfactory, and how could we improve them? (the findings)

- What was the impact of our work, and how were our search efforts related to that? (the results)

The answers to these questions will help place the effort in perspective, bring closure to a task well done and point the way to success for your group or another group in the next search.

SUMMING UP INFORMATION SEARCHING

For people involved in community affairs, information is essential. Finding information for problem solving and decision making is more likely to succeed when individuals and groups:

- cultivate a flexible attitude toward the sources and kinds of information that may be useful

- hold a common set of purposes, expectations and knowledge of constraints and resources for the search

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- plan the kind of information they will collect, how they will collect it and who will have the responsibility for collecting it

- capitalize on local sources of information

- avoid the common pitfalls of misunderstood purpose, specialized vocabularies and imprecise ways of classifying information

- collect and organize their information so that its meaning is clear and it can be retrieved easily

- provide for adjusting plans as the search proceeds and for assessing the results of the search at its conclusion

We hope the guidelines in this booklet encourage you and your group to undertake information searching with enthusiasm and a sense of adventure--to become detectives of the twentieth century.

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Sample Worksheet 1

Purpose and Expectations for the Search

Date:

Group or Person:

Purpose for Conducting the Search:

Expectations for the Search:

Note: Use complete sentences, rather than phrases, to avoid ambiguous interpretations of purpose and expectations.

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Sample Worksheet 2

Search Plan

Date:

Group or Person:

Topic or Problem Area:

Kind of Information Needed:

    Nature--

    Quantity--

    Detail--

    Format--

Search Method:

Responsibilities for Individuals:

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Sample Worksheet 3

Information Record

Date: Name of Recorder:

Source of Information:

    a.   Name, title or interest, address and telephone number for person:

    b.   Title, author, date of publication, full name of journal or publisher, page reference if written material:

    c.   Library or information system from which information was obtained:

Topic:

Pertinent Information:

Any restrictions on use of information:

How this information fits our needs:

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FOOTNOTES

1.   George Grimes and James Doyle, <u>Information Resources:</u> <u>A Searcher's Manual</u>, Detroit, Michigan: Michigan-Ohio Regional Laboratory, July 1969.

<u>Program of Instruction in Educational Research and Development</u>, San Francisco, California: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, September 1974.

Robert S. Taylor, "Question-Negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries," <u>College & Research Libraries</u>, May 1968, pp. 178-188.

2.   William J. Paisley, "As We May Think, Information Systems Do Not," symposium remarks, Stanford University, 1968.

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