Lasa’s RightsNet – A Resource for Advice

Project Evaluation
by
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Introduction

RightsNet, is a National Lottery Charities Board two year funded project that commenced in March 1998. The project sought to provide information, advice and support on matters relating to social security issues for advisers via the Internet. A central aim of the project was to evaluate the effectiveness of providing information and support services via the “new” medium of the Internet.

As part of the original project plan, forty-five agencies were selected to receive specific training on the use of the Internet and bursaries were available for these agencies to ensure they had the appropriate equipment. These agencies are referred to as the “project members”. A RightsNet key worker was identified by each project member and that person received training and support to enable them to make best use of the available information.

The RightsNet web site is an open access site. Participation and use of the site is not therefore restricted to these forty-five agencies or key workers. Other agencies that are using RightsNet but were not part of the original project are referred to as “non members”.

As part of the RightsNet project, Lasa employed one new worker who was primarily responsible for supporting the forty-five project members, managing the information available through the site and co-ordinating site design and usage.

Lasa maintains oversight of the relevance of material for all areas of the site. In practice for the discussion forum this means that all entries are looked at by Lasa’s RightsNet project worker to ensure they are accurate, where this is appropriate (i.e. factual information) and relevant (i.e. concerned with matters relating to social security).

The web site contains the following sections:

- **Discussion** – a number of discussion forums for advisers to request and share information and concerns on benefit matters.
- **FAQ’s** – a developing database of “Frequently Asked Questions”. Users can search the database to look at previously asked questions and see the answers given.
- **Links** – a list of links to other websites of interest to advisers.
- **Mailing List** – Email updates as to what is happening on the site.

The RightsNet site incorporates contributions from individual advisers from a range of network member agencies, local authority service providers and other professionals working in the field of social welfare law. A number of specialist information providers also contribute to the site by making their information available.

Since commencement of the service fourteen months ago RightsNet has been visited 11,537 times by approximately 975 different groups or individuals, as at June 1999.

Lasa would like to thank all those who took the time and trouble to reply to the various questionnaires and to those who have contributed to RightsNet by taking part in the various forums.

Purpose of the evaluation

An initial evaluation exercise was undertaken in the first six months of the RightsNet project, which looked at the experience of the first 15 project members. The findings from this exercise were incorporated into site developments and users views were used to change and improve aspects of the RightsNet service.

This evaluation has concentrated on the effectiveness of the Internet as a means of delivering support and information to advice service providers. The evaluation sought to identify patterns of usage, and views concerning the relative value and usefulness of information available. Findings from the evaluation will be used to help Lasa assess the potential of Internet support services and to suggest the most appropriate format and content of such services in the future.
Methodology

The evaluation was undertaken using three different questionnaires. Four different populations within the advice sector were targeted.

These were:

a) Project members “Key Worker” questionnaire sent to 45 people. [Total Response 39]
b) Project members “Manager’s” questionnaire sent to 45 people. [Total Response 38]
c) Non members but users of the RightsNet site sent to 240 agencies. [Total Response 20]
d) Non members not currently using the site sent to 240 agencies. [Total Response 80]

In practice, two questionnaires were sent to the same 240 non members and they selected which one applied to their circumstances. The 240 agencies were identified from the Lasa in-house database as groups that were in receipt of the Lasa welfare rights training team brochure and were assumed to have an interest in the subject matter held on the RightsNet site.

The questionnaires sent to both project members and non members who were using the RightsNet site were identical save for two additional questions on the project members questionnaire. This allowed the research to identify any differences in views of the RightsNet site between project members and Non members.

The questionnaire sent to “managers” of the 45 project members sought to identify any organisational issues that related to RightsNet usage. Finally, a short one page questionnaire for non members who had not made use of RightsNet to date asked about their expectations of a welfare rights Internet support service.

In addition, Lasa’s RightsNet project worker was interviewed concerning development issues and the RightsNet site itself was trawled for data verification following the questionnaire returns.

Findings

A further discussion of the key issues and findings is available in the full report.

- 58 out of the 59 respondents said they felt they were confident in their ability to use the RightsNet site.
- The most pressing problem for many organisations was how to ensure access throughout the organisation. This concern can be divided into two separate issues: the need for additional IT training for staff other than the RightsNet worker and the need to improve physical access to computers.
- 25% of all respondents accessed RightsNet either before their agency was open or after the agency had closed.
- 17 respondents accessed RightsNet once each week, 15 accessed RightsNet twice per week, 13 accessed the site 3 times per week, and the remaining 14 agencies accessed more often than this.
- Speed of response to requests for information was uniformly considered to be important, but some users had unrealistically high expectations of how quickly a response should be made.
- The majority of agencies (35 of the 59) spent between 1–3 hours per week on-line. Nine agencies spent less than an hour on-line each week and the remaining fifteen agencies spent over three hours per week on-line.
- Information available within RightsNet is distributed throughout organisations in a number of ways. Roughly one third of groups have trained other workers to access to site directly, while a significant number of agencies use a variety of methods to distribute key information, such as print-outs or discussions of RightsNet items at staff meetings.
- 37% of respondents had changed their patterns of usage over time, by visiting the site more often, spending more time at each visit and accessing more sections than before.
- When questioned concerning the visual layout, coverage of topics, ease of access and accuracy of information provided within the site, 80% of respondents said the various quality indicators specified were either Good or Very Good. The only exception to this concerned the frequency of updates of information that was felt to be average or poor by 31% of respondents.

(continued overleaf)
When asked to comment on changes made to RightsNet since inception, 37 out of the 53 who felt they could judge thought the site had improved and no one felt it had deteriorated.

93% of respondents said they would use RightsNet when seeking additional information to add to their existing knowledge of a subject; 65% said they would look to RightsNet for information on a subject they previously knew nothing about; 53% of respondents said they would use the service to check the accuracy of existing knowledge.

When asked to rank RightsNet against other comparative information resources for different types of information gathering activities, RightsNet came second in all but one category, with handbooks and guides as the first choice of users.

Respondents felt that RightsNet was most effective at providing factual information, but many users of the site wanted to see the provision of tactical information expanded.

The most frequently accessed part of the RightsNet site is the News service, followed by Reviews and then the Discussion section. The section felt to be most useful by users was the news section followed by the Discussion section and then Reviews.

Of the 80 agencies responding to the “non-users” questionnaire, 67 expect to have Internet capability within 12 months, providing a substantial and growing user base.

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Copies of the full report are available from Lasa at a cost of £5.00, or at the RightsNet website.