Information Needs Assessment

Background

Providers of information may need a formal information needs assessment to be carried out in order to determine the true information needs of their clients or stakeholders.

The results of an information needs assessment can be analysed and used to provide the basis of a comprehensive information output strategy, encompassing routine provision of information, dissemination of reports and publications, format and frequency of reports, publication media (e.g. electronic or print), and developments such as teaching or consultancy work.

The results will also help to inform the scope of the dataset to be collected by information providers.

Introduction

The information provider should accept that the information needs of its client and partner organisations may be of various types. Information needs depend on the type of work, the discipline of work, the position of the client within a larger organisation, general needs, and specific needs e.g. those precipitated by the need to take a decision to meet national and local agendas.

In carrying out an information needs assessment, one should be aware that clients may be able to express their information needs easily, may perhaps be unwilling to express these, or may be unaware of particular information needs. The information needs assessment carried out should carefully to distinguish between true information needs, i.e. information that individuals or organisations require to be able to function and information wants i.e. information that clients might like to have, but which does not meet any defined need and could prove difficult to supply.

In responding to a survey of information needs, it may be helpful for clients to consider the range of information already available from the provider and other sources and the uses to which this information will be put.
The information provider will also wish to consider its own views of the information needs of clients, such as:

- Who are the clients and why is receiving this information important to them? Documents and dissemination databases held by provider may provide a useful source of clients contact information for the information needs assessment.
- Which type of clients regularly request information and what are the functions and activities of the client's organisation?
- Frequency of use of specific sources of information.
- The form in which the information is preferred, including considerations of the quantity of information, and what kind of information is to be provided – facts, facts with descriptive text, data, technical digests etc. and other media e.g. print, internet, CD.
- Levels of urgency of requests and need for timely data – e.g. does the client require only very recent data or longer term retrospective overviews?
- Negative and positive feedback on existing information products, and attitudes towards changes to information currently provided.
- Education, training and special expertise e.g. consultancy work, that is or could be provided.

The requirements of the Freedom of Information Act, which was passed in November 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998 will also need to be considered, particularly when holding and releasing information that identifies individuals. Information providers should develop protocols and guidelines as to which data can be released in what form and to whom.

**Survey tools**

There are a variety of formats for conducting an information needs assessment. These include:

- Written questionnaires sent by mail
- Electronic versions of written questionnaires delivered by email or available through a web site
- Face to face interview
- Analysis of use of current information products
- Workshops and seminar type events.
There are advantages and disadvantages to all the methods listed above and clients could be consulted to determine which method of survey they would be most interested in. A brief overview of some points to be borne in mind when using the above survey methods follows:

**Questionnaires**

The design should be broken down into sections to allow identification of the unique features of the client, types of information required, use of existing information by the client, and amongst other things there should be room for further comments and suggestions. The design should also reflect the ability of the provider to provide the requested information, and should permit quantitative analysis i.e. by categorisation of response rather than free text.

Return rates of questionnaires can be low and it may help to offer some kind of incentive to return the questionnaire, such as pre paid envelope, or payment or service in return, such as a free copy of the final report of the survey.

Questionnaires are generally more helpful in finding out about known information needs. The client may be unaware of certain information needs, either because their need for information has not yet arisen, or because they do not know that such information could be made available to them. The questionnaire may not be the best way of determining if the providers’ current levels of information provision meet the clients’ expectations of quality. More in-depth evaluations such as these may be better addressed by interview or seminar/workshop events, employed alone or complementary to the questionnaire.

**Electronic communication**

These methods can save on mailing costs and may be more attractive to the client. However, not all clients will have access to ICT.

**Face to face interviews**
Direct interviews with the users of information would be a useful way to collect detailed data on information needs such as:

- Examples of information requirements.
- Detailed information about the client’s activities, which can be used to tailor the information supplied to them.
- Details of the client’s other sources of information, including access to databases etc.

Interviews enable a maximum return of questionnaires and may bring additional material, usually of a qualitative nature, including comments, suggestions and criticisms.

However, such methods can be expensive, requiring the time of both the interviewer and interviewee. Analysis of the information obtained can be challenging, due to its qualitative nature. It may be that interviews are used to obtain detailed information from a smaller subset of the survey population.

Transaction log analysis

Some information may already be routinely recorded by the provider in response to requests for data. Analysis of logs kept of requests received or web site hits can provide useful data. However, although information demands are routinely met by the provider, it may be that that clients find the information does not meet expectations, in terms of content or format. Clients may have changing information needs and a retrospective analysis of requests for information can only partially assist in determining the current information needs of clients.

Indirect information gathering

Data about clients’ information needs may also be gathered indirectly by analysis of previous feedback in response to information products, scanning reports or publications produced by the clients’ organisations, in-house knowledge of the type of activities the client organisation is engaged in (sales, registrations, etc.).

Specialist events – seminar, workshops, training event
Any meeting or training event with the participation of clients represents a good opportunity for surveying their information needs and asking participants to complete a questionnaire. More in-depth events which focus on specific aspects of information requirements can be organised, and these present opportunities to conduct individual or group interviews. From these, it may be possible to gain further information about the nature and quality of information supplied. The information provider may decide to focus on particular groups or hold events open to stakeholders from a variety of backgrounds.

Representation of client organisations should be carefully evaluated, to ensure that attenders are qualified to comment on their organisations’ information needs.

Steps towards beginning an information needs assessment

Setting objectives

The following points will need consideration before the objectives of the information needs assessment project are defined:

- What do we want from the survey?
- Who will do this work (in house staff or a consultancy)?
- How long will it take?
- What will the endpoint be (an information needs analysis of clients followed by a new information output strategy)?
- Which methodology/ies will we use?
- Who/which organisations to include in the survey, percentage targeted by the survey?
- How will we encourage participation and response?
- Who will be responsible for compiling and interpreting survey responses?

Resources and finance

- Costs of personnel, survey development, administration, analysis, preparation of report and resulting strategy, implementation of strategy
- Communication costs including telephone and fax
- Costs of staging events to obtain information needs from clients
- Cost of conducting interviews
- Postage
- Photocopying and printing of questionnaire
- General photocopying
- Purchase of analysis software
- Collation and analysis of responses
- Production of final report

**Timescales**

The planning calendar may include the following:

- Define survey population
- Decide on survey methods
- Create questions and define them
- Produce survey tools
- Produce and deliver the survey pilot phase
- Collect and analyse responses
- Modify survey tools and produce main survey materials
- Survey information needs
- Build in response time, including a reminder
- Completion of interviews,
- Organise and hold events
- Analyse feedback
- Produce an Information Output Strategy
- Agree by Information provider.

**Using the results**

The results of the analysis can be used to answer the following questions:

- What are the major requirements of each client? - sources of information, format of information, frequency etc.
- What are the major deficiencies in terms of information that is not provided to clients and is required by the client,
- Does the client have specific training or other needs?
- Feasibility of providing information as requested to the client, including availability of data, technical, staffing and funding issues.
An Information Strategy

Once the results of the analysis are ready, an Information Output Strategy can be formulated, including some or all of the following:

- The priority needs and preferences of clients
- Any major deficiencies in current information provided
- Priority areas to be addressed
- The initial framework of selected programmes
- Organisation of meetings to communicate the strategy, both to clients and in-house.
- A business plan to deliver the identified information, with details of information products, training events, and consultancy work, and containing estimates of resources required (staff and funding) and timescales. This will also have detailed programme outputs, and success criteria for later evaluation.
- It will also identify who (within the Information provider’s organisation) is responsible for individual elements of information output and any other organisations who work in partnership to supply information for delivery to our clients.

Follow-up

The information needs assessment should have a follow up phase built in to it. Brief results of the survey could be communicated to our clients, possibly in print or through a website. Thanking the participants would be part of this phase of the information needs assessment. The business plan may also detail ways in which the information supplied to clients will be evaluated. As the information needs analysis will provide a ‘snap-shot’ of current needs and agendas will change over time, there is the possibility of that the whole process could be viewed as cyclical, involving repeat surveys of satisfaction or information needs, leading to appropriate changes to the provider’s information strategy.

Bibliography

Devadason F and Lingam P. Practical steps for identifying information needs of clients. Based on a paper presented at the 10th congress of Southeast Asian librarians, May 21-25, 1996; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
http://www.geocities.com/athens/5041/infneed.html

Useful links

Small Business Information Needs Assessment Survey

Needs assessment tools
http://nnlm.gov/ner/nesl/9410/tol.html

Cancer information needs of black and ethnic minority groups
http://www.city.ac.uk/sonm/dps/research/research_reports/cox_c/cancer.pdf

Bridging information requirements and information needs assessment: do scenarios and vignettes provide a link?
http://informationr.net/ir/6-2/paper102.html

Identifying Corporate Information Needs
http://www.factiva.com/infopro/resource1.asp?node=right1

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