The Internet: a valuable resource for the hospital librarian*†

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BACKGROUND

The Internet is a catalyst that is changing the librarian from an information caretaker to information navigator and educator. By 1993, the Internet had emerged as an important technology for health care delivery and for health sciences librarians, so it became the focus of a one-year project of the National Network of Libraries of Medicine, New England Region (NN/LM NER). The project goal was to determine its value to hospital librarians through the use of a commercial dial-up Internet service provider.

Planning for the Internet project was conducted during the winter of 1993. At the time, a limited number of hospital librarians had access to the Internet, primarily through LIFENET[1]. The published literature indicated that librarians were using Internet primarily for e-mail and discussion-group purposes [2].

An Internet vendor was sought that could provide dial-up access using a direct connection or InfoPath. Several specifications were established: The vendor had to offer a full-service connection with e-mail, Telnet and FTP applications and an easy-to-use menu. It was also required that the vendor's staff have ability and experience in Internet training and provide telephone support throughout the year. A moderate fee structure was important so that participants could continue with Internet service after the project year ended.

The overall cost of an Internet dial-access service provider may include various charges. These charges were considered in vendor selection. The following questions were asked: Is there an annual membership fee? What is the annual cost for an Internet password? Will the institution have a direct telephone number or use an alternative telephone system, such as InfoPath, SprintNet, or Tymnet? If there is an alternative telephone system, are these charges based upon time, distance, or telepackets switched (i.e., the amount of information transferred)? Does the service offer a set fee, such as $25.00 for twenty hours? Is there an additional charge for work space or storage space?

The New England Library Information Network (NELINET) met all the criteria and was selected as the project vendor. Project results indicated that the total average cost for Internet dial-up service ranged from $600.00 to $1,000.00 per year. NELINET charged a flat rate of $25.00 per month for twenty hours of searching. (For the project year, the NELINET affiliate membership fee was waived.) Participants who used the long-distance InfoPath service to reach the host computer incurred an additional telecommunications charge that averaged $3.60 per hour, with the actual cost depending upon the number of telepackets switched. InfoPath users who devoted most of their time to e-mail and listservs incurred an average charge of about $1.80 per hour. Users who devoted most of their time to downloading lengthy documents via FTP incurred charges as high as $3.80 per hour.

USE AND VALUE OF THE INTERNET

A questionnaire was designed to determine participant knowledge of Internet applications. This information was collected at both project initiation and completion (Table 1). Responses indicated that the participants ranged from novice to expert in knowledge level.

Thirteen of the twenty participants reported incorporating the Internet into their library services. Participants' quarterly reports indicated that the Tel-

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Table 1
Respondent familiarity with terms, preproject and post-project

<table>
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</table>

* Two participants did not return the year-end data.
net option on the NELINET system was easy to use and that users had become adept at Telnet sessions by beginning with the familiar National Library of Medicine (NLM) databases. Telnet was also used to access DOCLINE, although the NELINET system did not provide an automatic line mode connection to this application. To connect to the standard log-on prompt from NLM, a specific phrase (t/n3270) had to be entered to activate the line mode connection. The DOCLINE screens then appeared exactly as they did with a value-added network such as Telnet, SprintNet, or Tymnet [3].

During the project's initial months, Internet sites that had biomedical information were located by NN/LM NER staff and six project advisory committee members. Due to time constraints, explorations were limited primarily to these uploaded sites as well as those recommended on the MEDLIB-L listserv. Most of the participants reported saving listserv messages that indicated useful sites. Additionally, many project participants became acquainted with other Internet users through listserv communications and shared useful sites and reference answers found on the Internet with these new acquaintances. Veronica was used to locate sites by topical areas; however, its reference utility was low due to frequent retrieval of irrelevant sites.

Midway through the project, NELINET staff developed a Gopher that was organized by subject, including health and medicine, business, law, and library literature. This Gopher facilitated participants' access to remote sites and increased the Internet's value as a reference tool. Many useful reference sites were found through casual explorations of the NELINET subject-oriented Gopher. Overall, participants became adept at incorporating the Internet into their reference work through the hands-on experience of daily "surfing" through cyberspace, looking for pertinent sites that can provide answers to nonclinical, administrative, and consumer health questions.

Project participants became their institutions' Internet educators [4–5]. By project's end, librarians reported holding various teaching roles within the institutions. Some librarians provided physicians with e-mail and listserv instructions and answered questions during hospital programs; others demonstrated the Internet to hospital staff. Two participating librarians reported that their information services department now refers in-house questions on the Internet to the library. The Internet gave project participants high visibility in their hospitals as each became the institutional Internet expert.

CONCLUSION

The Internet project was judged successful both by NN/LM NER staff members, who met project objec-

tives, and by participants, who indicated that they would continue to use the Internet following the project year. In addition to learning Internet applications and expanding their reference services, project librarians strengthened their professional positions as they became identified with the Internet. This project demonstrated that the Internet is a valuable resource for the hospital librarian.

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REFERENCES


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