

## Section 20: Conclusions and recommendations concerning further research

### 20.1 Introduction

This project addressed a number of topic areas, and readers are referred to sections 14 to 19 for detailed conclusions on each topic. This section highlights conclusions and recommendations for further research.

As has been pointed out in various sections, the sample of companies studied in this project was small. However, despite the fact that the companies represented a variety of sectors and were situated in two different metropolitan locations, there were more similarities than differences between them (see section 17). Additionally, a number of the findings are similar to other research results concerned with information-seeking by businesspeople, and use of the internet. Therefore we suggest that our research findings are at least worth testing with other samples of small businesses, to refine the model we suggest.

### 20.2 Use of communication media

Use of the project website was analysed (see section 5.2). It was found that key referrals from well used websites and email newsletters appeared to boost use of the pages, and that there were also seasonal variations. As the number of page accesses increased, so did the variety of Top Level Domains and individual domains using the site. Strategies in searching the site appeared to be ineffective because the searches were either faulty (e.g. misspellings) or too specific.

Email emerged as the key internet application used by project participants (see section 6.1). However, project participants made no use of the discussion list (see section 6.2), even after the focus groups had provided an opportunity for people to meet and exchange experience face-to-face. There could be various factors affecting this, but we felt that the novelty of discussion lists, the lack of personal email addresses, the lack of a convenient internet connection, and motivation, could all be influential.

Relatively little use was made of the Helpline (see section 7). We concluded that the use of a reactive Helpline by itself was unlikely to be effective.

We would make the following recommendations:

- That before basing any services or projects around email communication, the extent to which participants have personal email addresses and connections on their desktops should be investigated.
- That face-to-face meetings are important in trust-building, and in facilitating relaxed exchange of experience, and would be an important part of any exercise aimed at improving internet expertise in business.

### 20.3 Information use

We analysed patterns of information use amongst the project participants, and identified changes between the beginning and end of the project (see section 15). By the end of the project, a wider range of internet sources was being used. There was a small decrease in the use of print sources, and evidence that internet use was replacing some visits to the library and phone calls to external organisations for information. In connection with this work, we recommend that:

- Comparative studies of information use should include consideration of non-written sources of information such as external contact and agencies, and put emphasis on examination of process as well as medium. It is possible that internet sources may first of all displace information gathering that most obviously involves time and effort, for example phoning an organisation for information, or visiting an organisation. Further research in this area would be valuable.
- A repeat questionnaire administered to the same companies one year after the 'final' one (i.e. in July 1999) would be useful, to identify any further shift towards the use of internet sources.
- The aspect of searching with a colleague (motivations, roles and benefits) is also worth exploring.

## 20.4 Virtual SME library/information service

Issues and models are discussed in section 16. It is recommended that the concept of the virtual SME information service be explored further. Issues include identifying:

- The extent to which resources could be shared (e.g. what level of tailoring is needed in order to make sure that companies in a specific location or industry sector feel that the service is ‘theirs’?)
- The extent to which cooperation between services is feasible
- The combination of partners which could deliver the most effective blend of services
- The model (e.g. consumer agent, or producer agent) which might be most effective when appealing to small business
- The costs and possible revenue from such a service
- The extent to which existing partnerships could be exploited
- Information professionals with appropriate skills and attitudes

Sufficient research seems to have been done on the basic types of information that are valued by business, and our research seems to indicate that the source types that were valued in printed form, or as delivered by personal contact, will be the ones that will also be valued on the internet. Key issues here are, therefore, enabling businesspeople to locate the information in these sources when they want it (ensuring convenience, speed and timeliness), and keeping up to date with changes in what is available.

## 20.5 Barriers and stages of engagement

We identified various barriers to use of the internet (section 14). Study of these, and observations drawn from various parts of the research have led us to put forward a four-step Staircase model of internet engagement (see section 18 and diagram 18.1) and making the following recommendations:

- Contact with existing participants should be maintained where possible and annual checks carried out using the Staircase to assess the pace of evolution
- New studies using the Staircase should be conducted with new participants and in other geographic areas to confirm our findings and support regional policymaking
- It should be considered further which categories of engagement should be targeted by library and information services (see section 16)
- Research should be undertaken to determine how typical our findings about use of the internet as an information source are when compared with other forms of innovation in SMEs, and to examine the responses of other support agencies to these forms of innovation
- Both business support agencies and library and information services should tailor their services appropriately to the company’s stage of Internet Engagement. Focusing information and advice around triggers for upward movement (i.e. in order to stimulate these) and downward movement (i.e. in order to help companies counteract these) should be considered

## 20.6 Research into the information needs of small business

White et al. noted in 1982 that it would be useful to have a central point for information on work that had been done in this area, to maximise the use and usefulness of the many small-scale studies that are done (e.g. by students or local advice agencies).

A further characteristic of the literature is that there are contributions from different disciplines, most notably the marketing discipline and the library and information field, and also from those working outside academia, such as government departments and trade or support bodies.

The internet makes the realisation of White et al.’s recommendations a much more practical option. Whilst there are web sites focused on ‘SMEs and Information’ these are in fact concerned primarily with ‘SMEs and information technology’ or ‘SMEs and electronic commerce’.

- It is recommended that the feasibility of setting up a virtual community for those interested in research concerned specifically with SMEs and their use of information content be investigated.