

Section 7: Helpline, Meetings and Site Visits.

7.1 Helpline

The Helpline was provided by the Project Officers via email, via an email link from the project web site, and by telephone. The idea was that companies which needed advice on the choice of internet sources, on searching, or help following a failed search could gain immediate assistance. These enquiries would then be logged and a picture could be drawn up of the kinds of problems companies experienced when searching and the kind of information that they required. This service was not heavily utilised.

The majority of questions asked were not of the kind that could be answered efficiently from using the web. Many questions were related to the internet, rather than being business information requests which could be answered by searching the web. Several of the enquirers were seeking advice or support in improving their internet capabilities. These would have been better answered by advice agencies. However, the companies were unsure which of the many agencies were the appropriate source of assistance. Even when the requests were related to business information, using the web to answer them was not always the most efficient method. Knowledge of local resources, not yet available on the web, meant that a phone call was often the most cost-effective response by the Project Officer.

The questions and answers submitted to the Helpline are listed in Appendix 8. The topics were:

- Information on graduate placement schemes
- Tracing an article containing information on internet connectivity
- A list of addresses of all UK higher education institutions
- Web sites concerned with predictive dialling
- Advice on resources for setting up a digital trading network
- Advice on setting up an interactive website, and on likely costs of web designers
- Information on 'healthy' buildings.
- Solution to a problem with the participant's communications software
- List of local councils in Scotland
- Information on new building work in Scotland
- List of 'good' architects
- Information on whether South Bank University could host a website
- A map of Leeds city centre
- Advice on how to get a stalled page to load

This underuse of the Helpline is interesting, considering some of the questions which were raised in the interviews and during the focus groups. For example, two participants said that they had 'lost' the project web page, and felt silly about asking for help in finding it. In one case, it emerged that the participant had not grasped that one could find a site by typing the URL into the web browser (he had evidently thought you could only find it by following links).

It was possible to conclude that providing a reactive 'help' service on its own is unlikely to be fully effective, as novice internet users

- may be embarrassed about asking simple questions (especially if they feel the answer has already been given to them),
- may not identify, or be able to define, the problem that they have, and
- may not know that a problem they are encountering is a soluble one.

This also ties in with the finding from the literature, cited in section 3, that people in small businesses may not be skilled at identifying the nature of the problems they encounter.

7.2 Meetings and site visits

A breakfast launch meeting was held in an internet café in Glasgow in November 1997, hosted by Sue Allcock, Sheila Webber and Colm McCartan (who had designed the web site). This gave the opportunity to demonstrate the web site and to gather material for the case studies, as the discussions were mostly one-to-one. Glasgow Chamber of Commerce hosted a reception in August 1998 to mark the end of the project. A training session on searching was also attended by a few project participants. Because of the problems in recruiting London companies, as mentioned in section 4, there was not a London launch event.

The majority of companies received at least one site visit. There were a couple of exceptions, for example one company which was based some distance outside Glasgow and which it found it difficult to schedule a meeting. In these cases extended telephone conversations took place.

There is information at the start of each of the case studies in Appendix 1, indicating the interaction that took place.