



68th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 18-24, 2002

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Code Number: | 125-077-E |
| Division Number: | I |
| Professional Group: | library and research services for parliaments |
| Joint Meeting with: | - |
| Meeting Number: | 77 |
| Simultaneous Interpretation: | - |

Effective and responsive needs assessment

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INTRODUCTION

Why bother about client needs assessment research – aren’t we in the business of providing direct services? In fact, I think understanding client needs is the essential foundation of good service delivery. We all have broadly similar mandates of providing research and information services to help our Members and legislatures do their work. And we all see ourselves as client driven. This means we need to know what services our clients need and how well the services we are providing actually meet those needs.

Is needs assessment something that only the richer parliaments can afford? Are comprehensive studies and consultants a frill or luxury beyond most of us? While we all have to live within our means, I think there is a wide range of effective needs assessment we can do within limited resources.

Before outlining some of these methods, here are a few starting points:

What is Needs Assessment?

- I think needs assessment has three critical components:
 - a well-thought out strategy to identify what we need to understand about our Members’ research and information needs, expectations and preferences;
 - a range of reliable, effective and appropriate methods to find this critical information; and
 - just as importantly, ways of building what we learn into all stages of our strategic planning and service development.
- There are really two separate issues here: **assessing** what services and products Members need, and **evaluating** how well our services are actually meeting those needs. The balance will vary: if we are considering a new service, then we need to assess how strong the need for it is; if we are reviewing established research services, then we need to evaluate what Members think of the services and how effectively we are providing them. In practice, research and feedback from clients can serve both assessment and evaluation purposes.
- Our methods must be:
 - **reliable** – yielding information on our clients that is sound and useful, that we can confidently act on;
 - **effective** – so that we don’t have to devote too much of our scarce resources to finding out this information; and
 - **appropriate** – geared to our unique political environments; absolutely confidential and not intrusive on our busy Members.
- I will be emphasizing a wide range or **continuum** of methods. I think we never want to rely entirely on one or a few methods. The real value of such a continuum is as a whole; by researching client needs and use in different ways and getting feedback from different sources, we gradually build up a sounder overall picture. It also allows us to adapt those methods that best suit our resources and situations.

Be Prepared to Act

- We should only do needs assessment research or ask for feedback from Members if we are serious. We have to be prepared to act on what we learn. We may very well be raising their expectations by simply going to them.

- And that means that we have to organize ourselves to be able to feed the knowledge we gain from clients into our service planning.
- I like to think of continuous **planning loops**: research to understand what Members need → which guides our strategic planning and priorities → which guides which services we develop and how → we then evaluate how well the services are working from the clients' point of view + monitor ongoing client feedback → to guide continuous refinement and improvement of the range of services we provide.

Start from Strategic Priorities

- We need to start from our strategic situation → that determines what we need to know
 - for example, if you are going to develop an Intranet, you need to know if your Members have the infrastructure and skills to benefit from electronic products and resources, and to determine which products to develop, you need to know what information they need most;
 - if you are planning to offer research services to committees for the first time, you need to know very concretely how your committees do their work, what their major priorities are (legislative drafting, financial oversight, accountability, policy development, etc.), what analysis they need to support these priorities and activities, what specific services are going to be most valuable to them, etc.;
 - new Research Services face the quite fundamental questions of what info and analysis do their Members need and what research do they provide to meet those needs?
 - on the other hand, in more established services, we think we understand our Members' information needs (however imperfectly). But we still need to check that our understandings are sound, and we need to know how our Members' expectations and practices are changing. Plus, even if we think we understand their needs pretty well, the real challenge is to make sure we are actually meeting those needs. So established institutions may be focussing more on evaluating the services provided than assessing needs.
- What we are also doing is separating out what we absolutely need to know to achieve our strategic priorities from what it would simply be nice to know.

RANGE OF METHODS

Once we have identified the key things about our Members we need to understand better, how do we go about finding out? How can we do effective needs assessment within limited resources?

I am going to outline eight ways of getting critical information on Members' needs, expectations and service use; some of these methods are both cheap and effective. I don't mean this to sound like the kind of simplistic prescriptions we see in business writing (the six characteristics of effective presentations, the four keys to personal financial success ..); rather that these are some options to think about. I'll give a few concrete examples of each; and other colleagues will be able to fill in many more.

None of this is meant as a blueprint: we all have to adapt methods that work in our particular situations.

These various types of needs assessment and service evaluation are set out roughly:

- from less to more rigorous in methodological terms;

Needs Assessment

Equation

what you need to know + available resources (all in the context of your particular parliamentary environment) → how you find out

- from less to more costly or resource intensive;
- but not necessarily from least to most effective. I think that effectiveness and reliability comes from pulling together the results of different methods, as well as from effective design and implementation of individual projects.

1: Capture anecdotal information from Members wherever you find it

- We all have a source of information on Members' expectations and service use that is free and easy to find – **talking** to them and their staff. Part of our job as managers is keeping in touch with Members and their staff anyway; all we have to do is record what they are saying.
- A related and easy method is **to tap staff intelligence**. Front-line staff are in constant touch with clients and over time develop a good overall sense of what clients are doing and thinking. For example, my Branch has recently had a series of front-line staff forums on such topics as client and staff use of our Intranet products and client misperceptions about our services. (I used to use a written questionnaire to canvass staff impressions and observations but semi-structured focus group-type settings have yielded far richer information.)
- We might rightly hesitate to rely on such anecdotal information because it is not seen as rigorous or scientific. But I think that systematically collecting and correlating comments, suggestions and other tidbits from clients can be a rich source of insight on how they actually use our services and see us.
- Interpreting and using anecdotal information is a methodological challenge:
 - the main danger is that the people you are hearing from are not representative of all your Members – especially if they are your most frequent users;
 - so we need to also find ways to hear from Members that don't use us as much. A strategic priority may be to find out why and to correct any problems or barriers. This can be done through the various interviews and other means outlined later;
 - another danger is that anecdotal input is by its nature partial – only on the issue the client is interested in at the time as opposed to our overall range of services;
 - we also don't want to over-react to every good idea or suggestion from individual Members – we are really interested in understanding patterns and seeing trends;
- We certainly have to be aware of the methodological limits of what we hear from Members, but that does not mean that the information is not useful:

- one major advantage of open-ended conversations with clients is that they may tell us things we didn't know that we didn't know, or don't want to hear, or never would have imagined for ourselves;
- so, listening to Members can be a source of tremendously rich insight on how they perceive our services, but it is only one source among many and we do need to test these insights against more rigorous methods.

2: More proactively, ask for feedback on your services – and make it easy

- Our friends at Parliamentary Research in Ottawa include short **response forms** in every project they send out to Members. The response rate is a very good 45-50% and the results provide an ongoing indicator of overall satisfaction and many specific comments.
- My Library has **feedback buttons** all over our Intranet site and on specific electronic products. We occasionally put short questionnaires up: e.g. are clients using a new search engine we put on a Bills product? are they finding it useful? any suggestions for better presentation? The response rate has not been high, we think because clients are so busy and want to use the electronic products quickly and get out again.
- Many parliamentary libraries have comments, complaints or **suggestion boxes**.
- I personally think that having these feedback opportunities widely available is important even if there is not a high response rate and they do not yield that much useful information. We can constantly emphasize to clients that we are really interested in hearing from them, especially on gaps they see in our services and any suggestions for improvements.
- Hearing from lots of different clients in these many ways – even if still anecdotal and unstructured – can reveal consistent patterns over time. But to identify these patterns we need some **systematic tools and processes**:
 - we need to record the feedback we get from clients and our observations on clients in an organized way;
 - we then need to analyze these many bits of information to spot patterns and connections
 - this collection and correlation can be much easier if you set up a **database**, which can also link to results of more structured research methods to be discussed next. Australia has a ‘bouquets and brickbats’ database;
 - but if that isn’t possible, we can all make notes, review them regularly (which, of course, is also the trick with a database – the most sophisticated databases are useless if we don’t review the results), make reporting feedback from Members a routine part of our staff meetings (when my branch has a go-round of current client questions, I want to hear not just what the questions were, but what the clients said about how the project worked out).

3: Look for systematic ways to canvass clients

- To get beyond the methodological limitations of anecdotal information, we need to conduct more systematic research with clients.
- My Library has developed an example of small-scale structured interviews; what we call **contact point** research. We wanted to take advantage of the place where we most often interact with clients – when they call in questions to our phone reference desk.
 - after the client makes their request, we ask them if they can spare us a minute. We then pose one or two simple and structured questions (we have a supply of question sheets at the reference desk and the librarians simply record the responses on the sheet).

- most clients were happy to answer the few questions. Those who were too busy didn't seem to resent being asked and often said they would answer next time they called.
- This can be an easy and non-intrusive way of getting a significant number of responses fairly quickly from a reasonable sample of users (which remember, may not be the same as all Members). For example, we have used this method to estimate use of our Intranet site and products. By repeating the same process every few years, we can identify trends. We also record impromptu remarks and have gathered quite a number of useful suggestions for product improvements.
- This is a method that could be adapted by any service, even those with very few resources. But not for complex issues: because we are using a busy service point and busy front-line staff, we can ask only a few straight-forward questions.
- There is another source of systematic information that we all keep – **service statistics**. Stats are good ways of spotting trends in demand for services (if particular Members stopped using our services, we would want to explore why), for measuring client activity in more quantitative areas such as hits on Intranet products (if one product was used 50 X more than another), and for helping us determine where to concentrate our efforts.
 - There is a danger in collecting stats on everything we do or just because we always have. Stats are only as good as the planning that goes into deciding what to collect and for what purposes. We only want those stats that help us plan and monitor service delivery. And we don't want to have to put huge amounts of time into collecting them.
 - Where they can be very useful is as part of strategic planning: we identify our top priorities for the next few years, devise indicators to show how successful we are, develop stats to measure these indicators, and use them to evaluate how well we are doing against our priorities.

4: Pilot test all new service or product initiatives

- **Pilot testing** can be a cost-effective method of yielding actionable information, is absolutely essential to service planning and development, and can also be done on a small scale.
- Whenever we are considering or implementing a new service we need to know: Is the new service going to be of value to clients? More specifically, is it going to be valuable enough to justify our allocating staff and other resources? Once rolled out, are Members using the new service the way we anticipated? Are there changes we need to make to the pilot version of the services to better meet client needs?
- We can go to clients to assess if there is a gap in our services which the potential new service is intended to fill. But the main danger of simply asking clients about a new service is that they are likely to say yes uncritically, especially if it is something entirely new that they find hard to visualize;
 - one technique is to present clients with a prototype of the potential new service and ask them if and how they would use it;
 - another is to pose our usual service dilemma to them starkly: “all right, you will use this new service X, but to do X what should we drop – Y or Z?”
- An electronic variant is **usability research**. This involves sitting clients down in front of a computer and watching them actually use our site and products (e.g. we ask them to find certain information and observe how they go about it, or how they move about within the structure of a particular product). This shows us how clients actually use the products, as opposed to how we thought (or hoped) they would in our planning. It is absolutely crucial to fine-tuning our site and

product design and making sure that the products really are useful to clients. This methodology requires quite small samples and sessions of less than an hour, so doing usability research need not involve a huge investment in time. I think it should be an essential part of any development of electronic products.

- We can also follow-up new service initiatives. For example, my Library has been providing more value-added services from our librarians: rather than just a package of key articles and reports, a memo synthesizing the material; rather than copied pages of financial data from various years, a table highlighting the key trends; rather than a list of Internet resources, a memo sent electronically so that the links are hot and the client just has to click to get to them. We will be calling a sample of Members' offices who have received such projects to ask how useful the value-added features were to them. In other words, we think these enhancements make sense, but we need to see how valuable they are in the clients' own terms, how well their particular purposes are met.
- All of this requires us to be hard-headed as managers. We have to be prepared to cancel what we thought (or hoped) were going to be good initiatives if they aren't being used by clients or aren't seen as valuable enough to justify the resources put into them.

5: Look for captive audiences

- By this I mean people who are around the legislature and easy to interview, and who are either major users themselves or know about Members' use. To be blunt, these are people who feel obliged to help the Library out.
- Ontario, like other parliaments, has an **interns** program in which recent graduates work in the Assembly for a year to experience the legislative environment and enhance their skills. We interview them every spring, with a mixture of general questions to help us understand Members' overall use of Library services, and more focussed questions on specific issues we may be considering at the time. The interns have several critical advantages as a source of information: they alternate a term with a government and a term with an opposition Member, so that the 8 interns can tell us about 16 client offices; they do significant policy and legislative work in these offices, which we are particularly interested in; they are themselves sophisticated information and research users (partially because we train them), so they are good examples of more high-end users, especially of electronic products; and because we have now interviewed them for five years, they have become an invaluable source for historical comparison. It is also fairly easy to impose on them because one of our Research Officers co-ordinates the program.
- Speakers, Clerks or public relations offices in our legislatures often ask for background papers for Members attending parliamentary or other conferences, on jurisdictions Members are visiting, on the home countries of visiting delegations, or on other legislative issues. We can ask the colleague who co-ordinated the conference or visit how the papers worked out.

6: Regularly check in with key stakeholders

- I **interview committee chairs** at least once in the life of each parliament. My goal is to ensure they are happy with the services we provide them and to see if there is anything they would like to change or improve. I always take the opportunity to ask them what they think of Library research and information services and for their general suggestions for enhancements; adding to our overall picture from another 15 or so key Members.
- In our Assembly each party has its own research staff. I tend to meet with their heads each summer in the quieter period between sessions. As with the interns, the **caucus researchers** have worked very closely with the Library over the years and it is in their interests to let us know what they need. As with the Committee chairs, I want to check that our services are meeting their

particular needs – generally very demanding, with tight deadlines, and intensive use of subscription databases and other electronic resources. They are also a good general source on how Members from their caucus are using Library services and have had good ideas over the years for service improvements.

- **Exit interviews** with experienced staff. A methodological problem with any interviews is that if you are seen as nice and responsive (and all researchers are!), then clients sometimes may not want to hurt your feelings by seeming to complain. An advantage here is that people leaving can sometimes be more frank.

7: Do intensive interviews to answer specific questions

- One critical means of more systematic research which can yield extremely valuable results is personal interviews. To be effective, we have to consider a sample that is large enough and balanced enough (this will vary for our different parliaments, but generally includes by party, region, experience, offices held within the government or legislature, etc.) and with a question framework that will yield reliable responses. Interviews can be informal or more structured, use fixed questions or be more open-ended, and can focus on specific issues or be designed to yield broader information on clients' overall service use, expectations and perceptions.
- Interviews with a reasonable sample and tightly focussed questions can be used to answer specific operational or planning questions. These can be short – 20 minutes or so – and can be done over the phone if we can't pin busy Members down.
- One example we did several years ago involved newly elected Members. An election was expected within the year and we were beginning to plan our client relations campaign to the new House. We wanted to know what kinds of information and orientation rookie Members needed. We interviewed a sample of Members first elected to the current parliament about their experience when they arrived. This yielded practical and rich info which we used to guide our planning for the next cohort of new Members; for example, they said the first few weeks were incredibly hectic, they were bombarded with paper, and suffered from information overload; so we concentrated more on personal visits *after* they were settled into their offices.
- Sometimes the research is, in effect, commissioned by other branches or units within the Library. For example, colleagues in our Information Resources branch were considering enhancing our electronic press clippings. Did Members want more newspapers included or to have the database go back more than the current year; either or both would require increased licensing costs. We interviewed a sample of Members and staff and found that while both options would be nice, they did not value them that highly. We decided not to enhance the database in these directions and saved a considerable amount that was allocated to other resources. In these ways, client research can be used as a key decision-making tool by managers throughout the Library.
- I haven't been mentioning the traditional written questionnaire. Probably most of our libraries have mailed out a standardized and mostly quantitative set of questions in which clients are asked to tick off pre-determined choices or rate services on a scale. I actually don't think such highly structured surveys yield the nuanced information we need.
 - But written fixed choice questionnaires can be useful for specifically focussed issues. For example, we use short questions at the end of client training sessions to evaluate how useful the training was and identify further areas clients want covered.
 - Short questionnaires can also be a useful starting point in sunset reviews of services. We have recently sent questionnaires out with a paper status of legislation product. We want to discontinue the print version because we have a far richer electronic product on the Intranet and it takes considerable redundant time to produce, copy and distribute, time we

would like to re-allocate to other services. We gave Members several yes/no choices on discontinuing and asked them to write in any specific things they like about the print product or reasons why we shouldn't scrap it. We are getting enough responses favouring the paper product that we may have to keep it. But we may change it to a subscription service (at the moment it goes to all Members automatically) to save production resources.

- This type of research highlights that when we ask clients for specific advice and direction, we had better be prepared to respond to what they say (sometimes even when we aren't doing everything clients wanted).
- We also want to use such specifically focussed research to build up our bigger picture of Members' needs, information use and expectations. In the case above of investigating preferences for electronic press services, we were also able to obtain useful information on how clients were using our Intranet and other electronic resources more generally. In fact, it is valuable to end even very focussed interviews by asking Members and their staff if they have any overall comments, especially any suggestions on new services or things we should be doing differently.

8: Be as comprehensive as resources allow

- At the most intensive end of the continuum of assessment methods, a comprehensive set of **in-depth interviews with a broadly representative sample** of Members and their staff can be tremendously useful. It will yield more nuanced and reliable information than smaller-scale projects. It can serve as a benchmark on changing client use and expectations, and as a standard against which we measure our own performance. A great deal of research and literature has been developed on public sector service quality research that can help us plan such projects.
- We like to do a series of such interviews in the mid to late period of each Parliament.
- This is the time to get in outside consultants if you can – highlighting another methodological issue. It is not appropriate for managers responsible for particular services to be evaluating how well they are being delivered; clients will not perceive them as objective and may not be frank with them. External consultants may also have interviewing and analytical skills that you don't have in-house.
- There is another methodological – or rather interpretive – issue that even the most sophisticated research must take into account. We can get reliable information on what Members and their staff want; that is, what they think they need. But that is not always the same as what they actually need. We are the research and information professionals, and part of the key value we add is in interpreting their requests and preferences, and using our expertise to help them understand what are the best research tools and strategies to serve their purposes.
- Not everyone is going to be able to afford the extensive projects our Australian colleagues undertake. But your interviews can be geared to the resources you have; even a week of a consultant's time to do 20 or so client interviews can be an investment that will yield tremendously valuable information. Another option is to have a trained Library staffer do the interviews, as long as they are not involved in direct service provision.

CONCLUSIONS: CLIENT INSIGHT INTO ACTION

What do we need to be able to do all this?

- First of all, a **strategy**: it is wasteful and ineffective – let alone irritating to busy Members – to have all kinds of people all over the Library launching their own client needs research. All needs assessment projects have to be well-focussed and co-ordinated.
 - Part of the strategy is also communications to Members. It is always useful to follow-up with the participants in projects to tell them what overall results were found and what we are going to do about it. Every time we follow-up in this way, we are reinforcing the theme that we do listen and respond to clients.
 - More generally, if you have a regular communications vehicle to Members, it is worth keeping them up to date on projects, findings and action taken in response.
- We also need the requisite research **skills**. They are not that arcane; many researchers or managers with social science training will have studied or conducted such research. External training can also be a good investment.
- Returning to the beginning, we need **the commitment to act** on the knowledge we gain about our clients' needs, expectations and use patterns, and actually build that into our service planning and delivery.
- And finally, we need processes and structures to **translate the knowledge** we gain on clients into sound strategic and operational planning. Key facets of this are:
 - A team or responsible manager to co-ordinate and implement the various needs assessment projects. My Library has a cross-branch Client Relations Team to play this strategic and co-ordinating role. It also acts as the forum for prioritizing and dovetailing the various issues that could be investigated and as a clearing house where managers or staff can bring issues and ideas they think should be addressed.
 - We also have a designated co-ordinator to keep track of the various projects and conduct a good number of them directly; these are part-time responsibilities combined with other parts of a person's job.
 - We need clear and consistent planning loops to feed the knowledge gained to the managers or planning forums who need to know (plus expectations that all managers will respond to results relevant to their spheres).
 - We also need an appropriate use policy: even using just a few of these methods, plus keeping service stats, you will end up collecting a great deal of personal information on clients' service use and opinions. Confidentiality is one of our core values, and must be absolutely guaranteed. But we also have to analyze the purposes for which we can use the information we collect, who should see what level of detail on client research and feedback, how long we keep the info, etc.

We can be modest in our own expectations. We never get to make our strategic and operational decisions with all the information we would like. And we are never going to understand everything about our Members; they are too unpredictable and their environment changes too fast for that. But the more information we have on Members' expectations, preferences, service use and satisfaction, the better we will be able to plan and refine our services to best meet their needs.

Deciding which methods to use is never an all-or-nothing proposition. If we don't have the resources for comprehensive and systematic interviews, it doesn't mean we do nothing. We can use the most effective methods possible at the time and within our resources. We save up those issues that are best handled in a comprehensive survey and we work away at issues that can be effectively done with small projects.

We can also be flexible; adapting those methods that work best in our particular environment. And if a method didn't work too well, then we can try another. I have emphasized seeing these different methods – and many others that other libraries have used – as a **broad continuum** from which we can draw the best methods to suit the situation.

By seeing these methods as a continuum we can also think about how to effectively use them together:

- these different methods can be used to test each other:
 - We may see a pattern in what we are hearing informally from Member's staff and want to assess its validity with more systematic methods. For example, in our internal forums many front-line staff had heard clients say something along the lines of "we're sorry to bother you .. we know you are so busy." We are busy, of course, but we never want clients to be discouraged from calling. We will test to see how widespread and significant this perception is in a series of qualitative interviews in the fall.
 - Do hit stats on Intranet products confirm what staff are hearing on which products clients use the most? Are both of these sources consistent with what we hear directly from clients in interviews or contact-point research? These different sources did show the same broad patterns, and this helped us prioritize which products to enhance.
 - It is prudent to worry about the methodological rigour of individual projects, and we must be cautious about interpreting the results. But reliability and insight come not just from designing individual projects well, but from using a wide range of solid methods and investigating particular issues from several angles, all to build up a comprehensive overall picture of clients' research and information needs.
- the real challenge – and the real value – is in analyzing the results from all the various methods and projects as a whole, taking account of each's methodological limitations and specific focus, but looking for common patterns and insights. I think we build up our understanding of Members' needs through a continual process of learning about them in different ways, and testing and re-testing our findings and conclusions.

Finally, to return again to the point about acting on whatever needs assessment we do: one of our scarcest resources is management 'thinking time'. We need to somehow build in the time to reflect on the results and incorporate them into our planning and service delivery. Making effective use of what we have learned is the whole point.