

Technical Support Assessment

Voluntary, Community-Based Sector in Newfoundland and Labrador



Prepared for Industry Canada's VolNet Program

by the Community Services Council, Newfoundland and Labrador

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The primary conclusion of this assessment is that there is need for technical support to voluntary, community-based organizations to enable them to make more efficient and effective use of technology and connectivity. The results of the assessment underscore the need for developing a toll free technical support service as a pilot project enriched by onsite and online workshops and new training opportunities. Information from organizations of all sizes in all regions, indicate a significant desire to make the most of modern communications technologies like e-mail and the Internet. Current obstacles include cost, time, lack of technical help and volunteer knowledge. Other challenges in getting 'up to speed' with technology include access to expertise, especially in more remote and smaller communities.

Purpose of Assessment

This assessment was conducted to ascertain priority technical support issues for the voluntary, community-based sector in Newfoundland and Labrador and to determine if a toll free line and/or other support services might meet their identified needs thereby enhancing and building on organizations' connectivity. Based on CSC's knowledge and previous research about the sector and experience as a Delivery Agency for Industry Canada's VolNet Program we know there is a significant appetite for advancing use of information technology. The current assessment posed a variety of questions ranging from the condition of current equipment, frequency of usage of e-mail and the Internet, barriers to obtaining technical support and comfort levels of organizations with technology and preferred approach's to technical support.

Key Findings

Despite barriers, most organizations connected to the Internet use it consistently. They report daily use of both Internet (67.7%) and e-mail (73.1%) services. While confidence in Internet use is somewhat lacking, organizations are continuing to integrate the Internet into their activities.

Primary conclusions of this assessment include:

- There is a strong commitment to using Internet technology.
 - There is a high demand for support, advice and training to develop in-house expertise.
 - Equipment is aging and many groups use borrowed equipment.
 - Location (i.e. being in remote and small communities) is a major barrier to Internet access.
 - Overworked staff and volunteers often do not have time for the long waits for support services.
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- A toll-free technical help line would be beneficial to organizations:

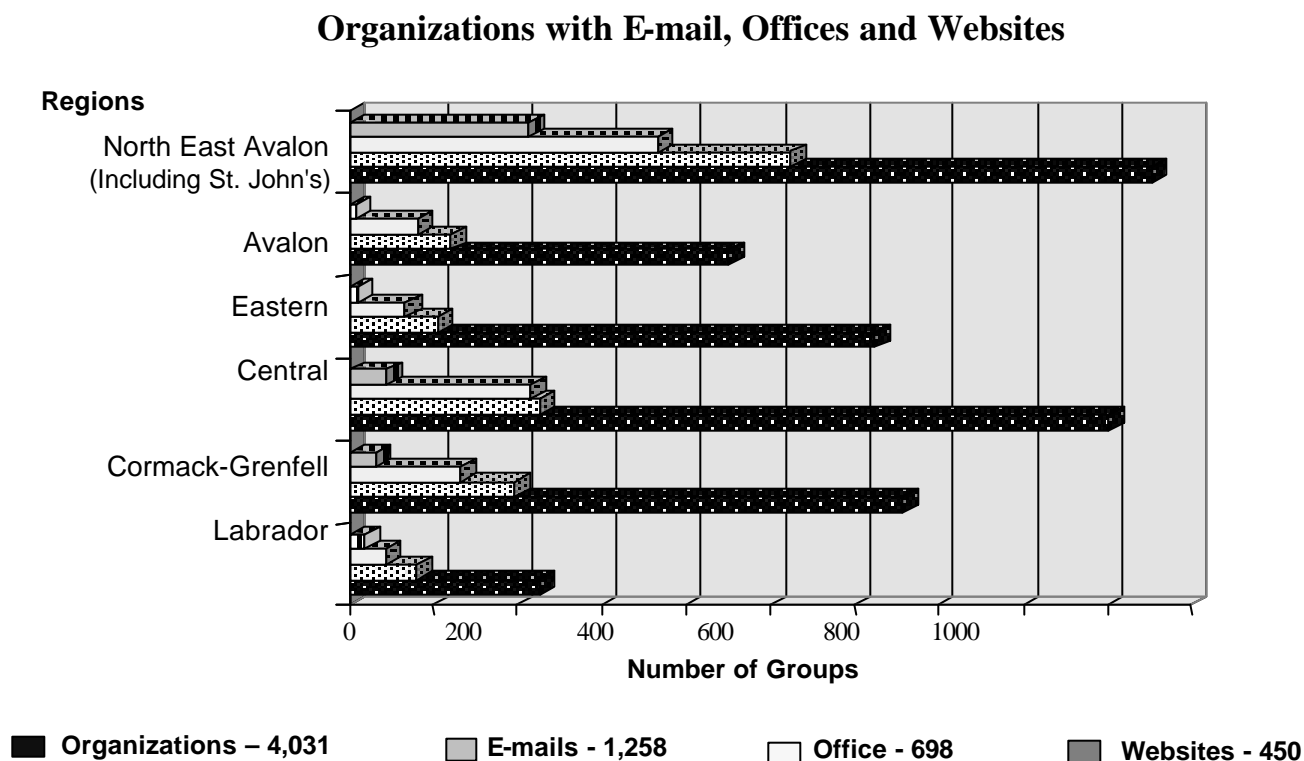
- Technical support is required for both hardware and software problems.
- Toll-free support should be available outside regular office hours.
- Other types of technical support such as workshops, online tools, troubleshooting documents and mail-outs would be useful.

Baseline Research

Previous research: CSC's prior research experience has established the need for technical training and support in the sector. Computer and Information Technology issues were two of the top three training requirements (approximately 70%) identified in CSC's important *Values Added* research delineating the sector in 1998-9.

Internet use is growing in the sector. CSC's database of non-profit activity (N=4031) in Newfoundland and Labrador indicates at least a quarter of sector organizations have access to e-mail services, almost double the number who report having office space (N=698).

Figure 1



Source: CSC April, 2001; all figures are approximate

Assessment: The sample for the 2001 technical assessment (N=165) was representative of the diverse voluntary sector covered organizations large and small, representing aboriginal, remote, health, social, educational and economic development organizations. The assessment reached into 75 communities across the province including 15 organizations in 10 communities in Labrador. More than 20% of organizations were in communities with a population of less than 1000 and just over 50% were in communities of less than 5,000. Forty-three percent of organizations studied for the purposes of this assessment are VolNet recipients.

Barriers to Internet and Technology Use

Barriers to technology use prevent organizations from using Internet and technology efficiently. The assessment determined that only about half the organizations reported their organizations were 'comfortable' using Internet and computer technology.

- Twenty-nine percent (29%) indicated they are not comfortable with Internet use.
- Although female respondents indicate greater levels of computer training, they are less likely than male respondents to report their organizations are comfortable with Internet and related technologies.

Barriers include: lack of staff training and knowledge; cost of proper equipment; fear of using equipment; lack of technical help; and lack of broadband width in smaller communities.

Computer Ownership

Many voluntary, community-based organizations have limited computer resources.

- Only 26 % of respondents specifically assign funds for the purchase of computers
- Aging of equipment is reported.
- 20 % of organizations reported they do not own their own computers, but use borrowed computers from members or other organizations.

The majority of organizations own between one and five computers, but report them to be older pieces of equipment, increasing the likelihood that they lack warranties and thus lack ongoing access to even basic technical support.

Need for Technical Support in General

Internet technologies may be much more difficult to use than commonly acknowledged for voluntary, community-based organizations.

With the exception of a few organizations and participating VolNet groups (which use CSC's toll-free service) sector representatives rely solely on their Internet Service Provider for toll-free technical support regarding Internet use, and these services were often criticized as being unreliable.

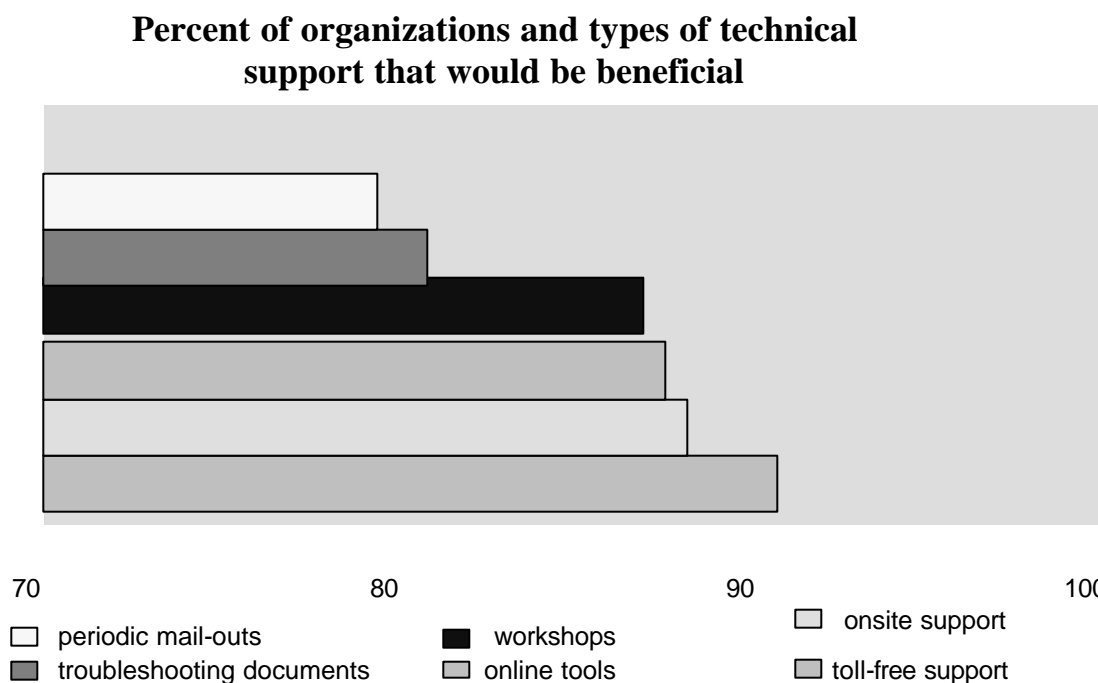
- Two-thirds of groups (66.0%) fail to allocate funds for upgrading computer equipment.
- Only 18 percent assign funds specifically for technical support.

Lack of technical support is a concern reported by most organizations and limits the potential use of computers and the Internet by the voluntary, community-based sector. Specific concerns include: cost of service to hire third-party technical support; problems getting online; lack of free technical support; and trying to keep up with new technologies.

Conclusions

There is strong support for a 1-800 technical support line. Most organizations would prefer toll-free technical support, followed by onsite support at their organizations. Online tools and workshops followed as most beneficial types of technical support.

Figure 2



(N=118) N.B. Respondents whose organizations did not own computers did not answer this question.

Over 90 percent of organizations who rated potential forms of technical support indicated that a toll-free technical support line would benefit their organizations by: giving advice about computer software/hardware; solving problems with online access; support for how to update websites; benefiting volunteers with no experience using computers; advising how to solve problems efficiently and tackle more difficult tasks; and lowering phone costs. A strong commitment to using the technology, in addition to reliable support and

training will result in voluntary, community-based organizations using the Internet, and its many applications more effectively and with greater confidence.