

INTERFACE

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Industry Canada — Information Management and Accommodation Services Newsletter

Server developed for better information distribution

Industry Canada is creating an Enhanced Information System to give clients a single electronic doorway into its collection of information products.

The Enhanced Information System, also known as the "super server," is a key element in the development of an electronic distribution system that will give clients better access to information from the department. It will bring information currently distributed through such diverse methods as newsletters, CD-ROMs and existing servers together at a common access point.

The server will offer the department a cost-effective way to distribute information to a very large number of clients, says Colin Wright, Project Manager. It will also be a valuable tool for the Canada Business Service Centres.

The single interface will be a major service improvement for private and public sector clients, says Colin. "Currently, our clients can never be sure they are receiving all the information support Industry Canada offers," he explains. "It is just too difficult to find it all."

The proposed server will give clients high-speed access to departmental data and will also be capable of handling the department's requirements for the foreseeable future, including options such as interactive multimedia conferencing, adds Colin. "Right now we are working to provide an initial service offering by the end of March 1995 that future developments can be built on."

The funds to set up the server are being provided through the Informatics Resourcing Strategy (IRS) Fund. It is the largest IRS-

supported project to date at Industry Canada. The project is being supervised by a steering committee that is co-chaired by Grant Westcott of the Information Management and Accommodation Services Branch and David Waung of the Strategic Information Branch.

Three groups are reporting to the steering committee. The project office is responsible for putting the system together. The technical committee deals with issues such as integrating the server with the department's wide area network and ensuring that proper security measures are in place. The user committee is made up of people who will be putting information on the system.

The hardware required has been purchased and specifications for the software are being drawn up. "If it is possible, and I believe it is, we will select off-the-shelf software to run the server," says Colin. "Some customization may be required, but our intention is to go with a product that has already proved itself." ■

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NAME THAT 'TOON
Send us your ideas for a caption for this cartoon. Last issue's winning caption is on page 4.

Look Inside!

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| EDI | 2 |
| IM Vision | 3 |
| New name for IMB | 3 |

For more on the Super Server, see page 4.

WHAT IS EDI?

Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) is a method of moving data between organizations. What makes EDI special is that each participant, called a trading partner in EDI jargon, can immediately use the electronic information they receive without any expensive manual re-keying of that data. Because the data can be used immediately in the receiving office's applications, processing time is sped up considerably. EDI also eliminates the need to develop interface programs for each of the systems, reduces paper use and saves on mailing and fax costs.

Unlike other methods of transferring data between computers, EDI uses a standard format for the information being transferred. Before leaving the sender, the original application file is mapped. That is, it is converted from the format used by the application that created it into a format that conforms to EDI standards. The receiving trading partner can then map the data into a format that can be used by their software application.

Participants sign an agreement before beginning to use EDI that sets out the terms and conditions for their electronic trading. In many cases, partners will also agree to use a value-added network (VAN) — a commercially operated network that provides EDI services such as standards enforcement, security, validation of users, electronic mailboxes and training. ■

Groups share EDI expertise

Groups in Industry Canada interested in using Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) technology have banded together to make better use of their resources.

EDI is a technology that allows organizations to transmit data electronically, data that is usually sent on paper (see "What is EDI?" on this page). With EDI, information is exchanged directly between one computer and another, eliminating the need for any re-keying of the data. In addition, data can be sent from any location, thereby allowing an organization to provide the same level of service across Canada.

A number of different groups in Industry Canada applied for Informatics Resourcing Strategy (IRS) funds to adapt the technology in order to deliver better service to their clients. "Rather than have everyone go off on their own, the IRS Committee suggested the interested parties get together," says Ginette Fillion, EDI Technical Advisor. Corporations Directorate was the furthest advanced in its preparations, so it will conduct an initial pilot project with some of its clients. A steering committee will allow all participants to benefit from the experience.

The original steering committee members are Elaine Collins of the Corporations Directorate, Doug Quesnel of the Office of the Superintendent of Bankruptcy and Denis Benoit of Spectrum Management. Michel Chrétien of the Trademarks Branch, which had already begun work on an initiative of its own, has also joined the steering committee, as has Bob Allison of the Finance Branch, who adds his considerable experience with EDI to the group. The chair is Peter St. Germain of the Information Management and Accommodation Services Branch.

A request for proposals is being prepared for the necessary hardware, software and services to conduct the pilot project at the Corporations Directorate, which will begin before the end of this fiscal year. In addition to setting up the technology, the directorate also has to make agreements with its clients to ensure they are comfortable with the new approach. The information sent over EDI will have the same legal status as forms currently filed on paper, so appropriate regulations, procedures, and security and audit features have to be put in place. ■

ROLES OF LAN COORDINATORS

It takes a lot more than hardware and software to run a network, says Garfield McFadyen of the Information Management and Accommodation Services Branch (IMASB).

"The common standards for our local area networks [LANs] and for the systems that run on them will only be as good as the people supporting them," he explains. For that reason, IMASB is conducting a two-year pilot project that will have all LAN coordinators and office automation and LAN support staff working together to better assist the regions and sectors.

Under this arrangement, the coordinators will work with sectoral and

regional staff to develop and implement a set of common office automation and LAN standards.

The coordinators will be able to share information from across different regions or sectors and pass this information along to staff in their areas. In turn, they will be able to pass along any concerns arising in their areas to both IMASB and to other coordinators.

This cooperation will allow the department to achieve economies of scale and pass the savings back to the sectors and regions in the form of better service. "If you establish an efficient, standard approach, where it is possible, it will free resources to respond to those unique problems that require specialized services," explains Garfield. ■

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT VISION — SERVING CLIENTS BETTER WITH STRATEGIC INFORMATION



Kevin Lynch, Associate Deputy Minister

There is a broad information vision driving many of the new initiatives, which have been described in recent issues of Interface, being undertaken by IMASB. In this article, Associate Deputy Minister Kevin Lynch, Chair of the Information Management Committee responsible for developing this vision, describes measures the department is taking to deliver strategic information to its clients to help them become more competitive.

Industry Canada is creating a strategic information network to link Canadian businesses to government and its information resources, and to each other, says Mr. Lynch. "The goal is simple — to enhance the ability of Canadian firms to compete in the global economy; it is the execution that is the challenge."

"Governments worldwide have realized that they cannot sustainably help firms compete by offering subsidies or other artificial interventions," he explains. "In today's world, businesses have to constantly work to develop and maintain a competitive edge. Providing strategic information — be it technology diffusion, market opportunities, trade data, marketplace trends or sector frameworks — is one of the most important and lasting contributions government can make."

Industry Canada will have to develop new kinds of solutions to meet this need, adds Mr. Lynch. "There aren't any *Harvard Business Review* articles called 'Five successful approaches to creating a strategic information network.' This is a new kind of challenge, and we have to rely on ourselves to get it right if we are to truly help our clients."

Working with the Information Advisory Committee, the Technology Advisory Committee and local information advisory committees, the Information Management Committee is responding to this challenge by establishing a framework to allow the department the necessary flexibility to meet its goals while ensuring the initiative remains focused on the key goals.

There are two critical elements to developing the framework. The first is to provide the technological means to deliver information products to clients in ways convenient to them. The second is to develop information products Canadian firms need to prosper that government is well placed to deliver. "Both steps will take effort and commitment from staff, along with partnership with our clients, if we are to get them right," says Mr. Lynch.

Right now, Industry Canada is in the formative stage of implementing this new vision, which includes the following steps:

- identifying, describing and cataloguing departmental information products
- conducting a strategic review of library services
- developing a better understanding of internal and external client needs and developing new information products to meet these needs
- comparing Industry Canada's practices to the best internal government and corporate practices
- establishing a more collaborative approach with clients and federal and provincial agencies.

"Our biggest challenge will be to work with business and other government departments to develop flexible and useful information products for firms from coast to coast to coast," says Mr. Lynch. "We are going to bring our clients into the process. We can and must use technology to dramatically expand our outreach to the business community." ■

NEW NAME FOR IMB

The Information Management Branch has changed its name to Information Management and Accommodation Services Branch (IMASB).

The new name was chosen because it more accurately reflects the branch's current responsibilities. Its directorates and their directors are listed below:

- Facilities Management (Director, Howard Dudley)
- Information Services (Director, Daniel Gagnon)
- Library Services (Director, Claire Renaud-Frigon)
- Sectoral and Regional Services (Director, Peter St. Germain)
- Computing and Telecommunications Services (Acting Director, Alex Bettinger)
- Strategic Technology Direction (Director, Samy Talbert)
- Policy and Operational Planning (Director, Pierre Poirier). ■

FEEDING THE SUPER SERVER

A user committee, whose members represent groups that are potential suppliers of information for the super server, is determining the best way to organize the system's "content."

Just moving information onto the server will not achieve the desired goal, says David Waung, Director General, Strategic Information Branch. "We currently have a situation where we have pockets of information all over the department. We don't want to duplicate that problem in an electronic environment."

The super server is one element in a larger initiative to improve the way Industry Canada delivers strategic information to clients — that is, information that businesses can use to support development plans, such as finding and adopting new technology, or seizing new markets in Canada and abroad. Some examples of the types of databases that might be provided on the server are those concerning trade statistics, patented technologies, licensable technologies, Canadian capabilities and macro-economic data,

such as GDP statistics and inflation figures, and industry profiles.

The department must organize this information on the server in a way that will make it easy for clients to use, explains David. The user committee is discussing what the content of the server should be and how it should be organized. This includes issues such as how best to consolidate the data if current databases overlap. The group is also providing information about the kinds of data and planned uses for it so technical specialists can determine what the system's capabilities should be. The committee is chaired by Ninon Charlebois of the Strategic Information Branch.

The information providers plan to get feedback from the client community once the system is up and running. "In the past, the government often consulted extensively with clients and then failed to deliver anything to answer their expressed needs," explains David. "This time we are going to deliver the product and then ask how we can make it better." ■

ENHANCED INFORMATION SYSTEM SPECIFICATIONS

The hardware for the Enhanced Information System or "super server" has been purchased and is being installed at the Communications Research Centre (CRC). The system will be capable of providing high-speed access to departmental data stored as text, image and, eventually, audio or combined image and audio.

A DEC Alpha platform with dual Alpha CPUs running at 150 megahertz has been purchased for the project. It has 48 gigabytes of memory storage space and is using the DEC OSF operating system. ■

Contest Winner!



"Computer Physicians"

Congratulations to Lillo Giardina of the Canadian Intellectual Property Office, Patent Branch, for suggesting the winning caption.

WORTH REPEATING

"Internet is like a firehose. There is lots of volume, but how do you drink from it?"

Seen on Internet

Published by Information Management and Accommodation Services Branch of Corporate Services.

Please E-mail your comments, suggestions or story ideas to (INTERFACE) or mail them to: *Interface* Editor, Industry Canada, Room 340F, West Tower, 235 Queen Street, OTTAWA, Ont. K1A 0H5.

