

EIARD-InfoSys User Study

Executive Summary

1. Background

At the EIARD-InfoSys workshop in Königswinter in May 1999, it was decided to improve InfoSys as an on-line information retrieving tool in agricultural research for development (ARD). In a continuing effort to be responsive to user needs and to increase usage and retention, a user survey on behalf of the Coordination Unit of EIARD-InfoSys was conducted by the Swiss Node at InfoAgrar. The main purpose of the survey was to gather information to define user-groups and their information requirements and to assess what further changes would make EIARD-InfoSys more valuable to its users and match particular "needs profiles". The survey also considered implications of user preferences for on-line information sources other than InfoSys. The study was carried out between March and September 2000 by Elke Bergius and Nicolas Küffer.

2. Main findings, trends

In general, the results of the survey reveals a number of trends to be considered in the further development of EIARD-InfoSys. Care must be taken, however, in attempting to draw final conclusions, due to the limited data base, particularly with respect to the amount of feedback on the present product of EIARD-InfoSys.

2.1 User profiles

Most participants in the survey were involved in either research, education or in providing/disseminating information. These three user groups rely on the Internet as an information source, particularly if research or information provision is the main job activity. A key finding is that most users were not active in just one single field. It was therefore difficult to identify clear-cut profiles in terms of user-specific information needs. Also, the mix of the different job activities was very variable. A number of users indicated that policy development, consulting, as well as management/coordination tasks were activities requiring additional time resources. Policy development and consulting were activities where people often indicated having consulted the Internet.

2.2 Information needs and Internet use

The study has put some emphasis on finding out the users' three most important job activities and to what extent the Internet was consulted for these. Originally, it was assumed that the use of the Internet correlates with the main job activity. This was, however, often not the case.

The main points:

- In the ARD community the Internet is a prominent but by far not the only information source. Overall, the Internet was the second popular information source in the survey, following journals. (CD-ROMs seem to be of little popularity and are hardly used)
- For about one third of all respondents, the main reason for using the Internet was not because of their main job activity, and in half of these it was indicated that it was not even because of the second most important job activity that the Internet was consulted.
- Simplified, 3 "user groups" could be identified: "researchers", "educators", "information providers"

- Features recognized for "researchers": Although most researchers consult the Internet, it is not their favourite information source and some still seem to be sceptical about data quality. They look for information on research projects, institutes, addresses and literature, but seem less interested in statistics and hot topics. This group also goes for traditional information sources such as journals, books or meetings.
- Features recognized for "information providers": This group seems to use the Internet frequently. Many of them search for up-to-date information on institutes or research projects, but also statistics and literature. They indicated no particular preference for a certain type of information.
- Features recognized for "educators": Education seems to be a job activity where people do not automatically make use of the Internet. It seemed that these users go to the Internet primarily for the sake of getting information for doing research. They appreciate the internet as a valuable information source. As for "researchers", journals, books and meetings are important information sources. When searching the Internet they look especially for institutes, research projects, addresses and literature. This group seems to have less interest in policy information and was less interested in events and news.
- The internet is quite often used for consulting activities and was often found in combination with marketing activities. These users were particularly interested in news and statistics.

2.3 Preferences for types of information

The main points:

- Information on profiles of institutes, research projects and addresses were asked for by many users
- Demand for news, statistics, technical information and events were very much dependent on the type of user: *news*: consultants; *statistics*: information providers, consultants, managers; *technical information*: consultants, educators, information providers; *events*: information providers, co-ordinators.
- No distinct preferences could be recognized for information on hot topics
- No clear preference was expressed for factual data, fulltext or download possibilities
- Users highlighted the need for short descriptions and hints where one can find additional information.
- There were two items that were attractive to most people responding to the questionnaire: more orientation on who is doing what and web-based lists of contact addresses. Working towards making more publications and services web-based could be a cheaper alternative to paper publications and could potentially attract additional users to InfoSys.

2.4 Use of on-line sources (homepages and news servers, search tools)

The main points:

- There was no observable trend to use one single standard homepage or gateway, but rather many different sources.
- About two thirds of the homepages indicated were mentioned only once or twice
- Most mentioned were the homepages of the CGIAR, FAO, OECD, IDS and DaiNet
- Most homepages analysed offer special features such as on-line ordering, news-service, clearing house, training information etc.
- Almost half of the survey participants were subscribed to at least one news server, but this was almost always a different one. Preferences for news servers in the field of general agriculture and research, environmental issues and biotechnology could be observed

- ARD-specificity did not seem to have much influence on the choice of a search engine and about half of all users are regular users of such retrieval tools
- high speed, quality of the search hits, and advanced search options were the most frequently appreciated features of search engines

2.5 Assessment of current EIARD InfoSys site

An important result of the survey was that EIARD-InfoSys is obviously not yet known within the European ARD community. The study team felt that the number of people responding to the questionnaire was too low to extrapolate the findings to other potential users of EIARD InfoSys.

The following points were repeatedly highlighted:

- The system has potential for improvement in structure and content
- Compared with benchmark homepages, the current site is too complicated and needs a simpler structure.
- The present system does not provide enough guidance or help for most users.
- Participants would like to have a slim system with no or only a few pictures (reduced loading time)

2.5.1 Structure. There is some concern that the current InfoSys website is not user friendly. On the structural level a good overview of the EIARD InfoSys content was generally missed. The orientation in the system was often felt to be cumbersome. Without consistent attention to user ease, additional web-based services may not be as desirable as they could be.

2.5.2 Content. The feedback gives an idea of which subjects do not yet seem to be covered sufficiently. The coverage was perceived to be unbalanced by a number of users, probably due to the still relatively small amount of data input. However, it is premature to judge on possible subject gaps since data input is still in process. The categories *plant science & production*, *environment* and *socio-economics* were particularly frequently mentioned as being searched for. Analysis of frequently visited homepages by the participants underscored users' need for a broad spectrum of information when looking for information in ARD on the Internet.

3. Recommendations

The study resulted in the following recommendations for the further development of EIARD-InfoSys:

- Promote the system and strengthen the National Nodes to become stronger backbones. For this purpose, communication among EIARD member states with respect to the existence of InfoSys must be improved. Members may be more willing to endorse systems development of EIARD-InfoSys if they know about it. An enlargement of the user circle will stimulate the National Nodes to continue to provide the system with data. And this again will attract more users and strengthen EIARD InfoSys.
- KISS - system (keep it simply structured): to gain time when searching and when the South is included, a simple, low byte search tool will be of great advantage.
- Enhance the structure of the current EIARD InfoSys, especially the overview of important characters, split-up and special services focussing on other ARD homepages.
- A special effort in data input would contribute to more significance and publicity to the system. EIARD InfoSys, in collaboration with the National Nodes, can raise user appreciation by providing the database with more entries. Considering the need for a rather wide range of information and subject categories, it is important to take a broad approach in subject coverage.

- The modification of the present system should orient itself according to the three cases of information needs: research, education and providing information. By attracting information-providing users, the system would soon become more popular in the ARD community. Users working in the field of research will benefit from a news server and by adding more information on funding sources, literature and statistics. Providing the system with more downloads and factual data could attract educating users.
- EIARD InfoSys should try to have its own unique profile to become more prominent as an information gateway. For this purpose EIARD InfoSys should try to develop a "one-stop news server". It could be based on three main pillars: 1) a news server which covers news, events, trends, job vacancies and other informative features, 2) a sign-posting-service, including factual online information from different databases in ARD existing in Europe to allow a cross database search and 3) a communication service with discussion fora, expert information.
- Target the main groups. Among these are primarily people in the area of research, education and information dissemination. It is recommended to perceive them as the primary users of EIARD-InfoSys and tailor services (e.g., via a news server) to meet their needs. This is not a simple task, since these users are diverse in their needs and expectations. EIARD InfoSys cannot be all things to all people. It must concentrate on the limited resources to retain these primary "users". In so doing, InfoSys may gain additional users by making the gateway more desirable and attractive.

4. Final remark

On one hand the Internet is an extremely dynamic source of information, on the other hand the needs and expectations of users are constantly changing. These parallel developments also influence each other. The findings of the study should thus be considered preliminary. It is therefore recommended to continue to closely monitor the user-orientation of EIARD-InfoSys when further development is undertaken.

Substantial increases in data input, simplification of the user interface, together with a sound promotion using effective tools and intensive communication can create a good basis for InfoSys becoming Europe's favourite information gateway to ARD.

Zollikofen, November 2000

Dr. Hans Dreyer
Manager InfoAgrar