



Managing Information

Good information management supports the work of your organisation by making information useful rather than confusing and overloading. You should think about what information your organisation needs and how best to get it. Information includes newsletters, newspapers, reports, email bulletins, leaflets, etc.

The key stages to go through to begin effective information management are set out below.

1: Finding out what information you need

Find out what staff, management committee and volunteers need to know, when they need to know it, and in what format (e.g. by email, full text articles, verbal briefings, postings on website, etc). This is an *information needs analysis* and forms part of an *information audit*.

You can find out about information needs in a number of ways. You could devise a questionnaire or you could sit down with people and talk through what they need. You need to find out:

- what information they create or hold themselves
- whether they have a way of sharing the information with staff and volunteers
- what type of information they need. Bear in mind that what information people *say they want* is not necessarily what they *actually want* or even *need*. Try to get people to be specific and to think about why they want to see information about the subjects they say do
- where they usually go first to find information and why
- whether they have difficulty finding information and if so, whether this is all information or information about specific issues
- what is causing the difficulty in finding information (e.g. too much or out of date information)

2: Finding out what information you have

Do an *information audit* to find out what information is actually held in your organisation (e.g. journals received, mailing lists subscribed to, etc.) and who has access to it. Compare your findings to the results of your needs analysis. By doing this, you should be able to identify gaps in the information you have, as well as information that you have but don't need.

3: Organising your information

Once you know what you hold and what comes into your organisation, you need to think about how to make the information easier to find and use. The methods used will depend on the size and type of your organisation. For example, you could bring all of the information held into one central place where it can be ordered in a logical manner. The system used to organise information in this way is called a *classification system*. For information about this see the Further Help section. But if you are a new organisation with no paid workers and no office, setting up a central place to store information might be impractical. Another option is to list the information each individual has access to, and to make this list available to everyone in your organisation so that they know who is likely to know, or to be able to find out, about a given issue.

Once you've organised your information for the first time, you need to keep it organised. That means:

- making sure people know what they should do with new information
- keeping the information up to date. Not only should new information be added to the body of information, but also old, out of date information must be removed. This is called weeding. You might do this on a regular basis or when space demands
- archiving. There may be information you want to keep but you do not need ready access to on a daily basis. This can be true of financial records, which the law can require you to keep for a certain period of time. You should store this information safely and securely

4: Dealing with incoming information

Now that you know what everyone needs to know, you need to make sure that appropriate information gets to them. You can do this in a number of ways:

- If only one person needs to see a particular journal, it could be sent directly to them
- You could scan incoming items for useful information, noting what you find, compiling these notes into a list and sending it out to staff and volunteers. This way, everybody has a summary of the latest useful information, and knows where to find the full text of everything
- All information could come into the organisation through one person who then redirects the information to those who need it

5: Understanding copyright and data protection

There are laws that apply to managing information, the most important of which are the Data Protection Act and copyright law.

Data protection: If you hold information about individuals or organisations there are restrictions on what you can do with this information. The basic rule is that you shouldn't do anything with this information that the individuals or organisations have not agreed to.

Copyright: Everything is automatically subject to copyright law. Authors or creators of information do not have to do anything in order to make something copyrighted. The basic thing to remember is that you need the permission of the author, owner of the image, etc. in order to copy it.

6: Working out the cost of managing information

There are costs associated with managing information. These can include:

- staff/volunteer time
- space (to store information properly)
- internet access
- journal subscriptions
- IT equipment (depending on methods chosen)

However, there are financial benefits to managing information well. For example, you may no longer be paying for a subscription that your audit revealed was no longer needed or staff and volunteers are no longer spending time sifting through lots of information to find the bit they need.

7: Monitoring and evaluating how you manage information

Once you have set up your information system you will need to monitor and evaluate it to ensure that the system keeps pace with the changing needs and priorities of your organisation. One way of doing this is to regularly consult those people who use the information and ask them about the information they access, how useful it is and whether there is information that they want but do not receive. It is like an information needs analysis.

You may also need to keep statistical information about the types of information you keep and ways you distribute it. For example, you can keep a record of how many email bulletins you send out and to how many people.

8: Further help

Green Fish Partnership - www.green-fish.org.uk

Voluntary Action Manchester - 0161 236 3206 or www.vamanchester.org.uk

Training Providers - **GMCVO** - www.gmcvo.org.uk or 0161 277 1000

CILIP - www.cilip.org.uk or 020 7255 0500

ASLIB - www.aslib.co.uk or 020 7583 8900

Legislation -

Data Protection Law - www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk

Copyright rules - www.cla.co.uk, www.copyrightservice.co.uk

Books -

Information Management for Voluntary and Community Organisations by Paul Ticher and Mike Powell (Directory of Social Change, 2000)

Information Management in the Voluntary Sector edited by Diana Grimwood-Jones and Sylvia Simmons (Aslib, 1998)