

Advicenow.org.uk - ISB Self Help Project

Final Report - March 2005

Executive summary

Introduction

- 1.1. From December 2004 to February 2005, Advice Services Alliance (ASA) ran a partnership project - a proof of concept development of a suite of internet-based transactional applications, designed to support a self-help approach to the resolution of legal problems. The project was funded by the Invest to Save Budget.
- 1.2. The project was developed and managed by ASA's Advicenow project in partnership with: AdviceUK; Blackfriars Advice Centre; Disability Information and Advice Lines UK (DIAL UK); National Debtline; Norwich Citizens Advice Bureau; Resource Information Service; Shelter; theOTHERmedia; and Walthamstow Citizens Advice Bureau
- 1.3. The key objective of the project was to demonstrate the feasibility of providing interactive case management and supporting services via the internet.

Achievements

- 1.4. We produced and published a range of self help material and specified, developed and tested a web based interactive case recording tool – the Tracker Tool - which were then evaluated. The project produced all its stated deliverables (see Project outcomes section for more details) within budget.
- 1.5. The information and interactive tool were well received by the public and were endorsed by independent evaluation. People liked the materials, found them simple and clear, were interested in using them, and indeed wanted more materials on topics which were not part of the original project.
- 1.6. There were delays to the project due to partnership difficulties and technical revisions. Risk assessment at the start of the project identified these as potential areas of delay, and we managed the changes - identifying new partners quickly, and working with our existing technical developers to minimise the impact on the project's success. To allow time for a full, independent project evaluation the project timetable was extended.
- 1.7. The self help pages were launched on 9th July 2004. We received feedback from site users and partners. The site was also independently evaluated. External evaluation was undertaken with five focus groups with Pakistani, British Indian and British Muslim and white British respondents, as well as a community centre with Filipino domestic workers and their advice worker. A full copy of the evaluation report is attached.
- 1.8. The Tracker Tool will take its place as a key component of the resources Advicenow.org.uk provides to the public.

Lessons Learned

- 1.9. The project highlighted the existence of a knowledge and skills gap - many people don't have the knowledge of how to go about dealing with a legal problem, and lack the basic skills needed to do so. They don't know where to find information on rights, what organisation they need to deal with and where to find further help. Self help materials must address the skills needed to deal with problems. Skills such as working out what your problem is, what result you want, how to find help, simple case recording skills, managing correspondence, confidence and assertiveness, and negotiating skills.
- 1.10. Evaluation of the Tracker Tool and supporting materials shows that interactive materials and tools are an effective way of learning skills that promote the ability to self manage.
- 1.11. From feedback and evaluation we learned that people are looking for these key elements in a self help package:
 1. Information – Basic guides to the law
 2. How to material – guiding people through a process, step by step guides (e.g. to a tribunal, or small claims action); when and where to find help; sample letters, forms and contracts, interactive tools and calculators
 3. Skills material – supporting skills needed for managing your problem, e.g. making a call to your landlord; negotiating with your employer; diagnosing your problem and working out what you can achieve; keeping records; making the most of your adviser. This material works best using case studies as examples, interactive learning materials, and simple guides.
- 1.12. Evaluation shows that people are interested in the idea of self help and willing to try it, but there is a fear of being 'left alone'. There is a tendency to think of self help as something separate from advice services with users left to go-it-alone. We want to challenge this assumption and see support for self help as part of the work of advice services. A small input of support by phone or email when self helpers get stuck can make the difference between their success and failure. This is a cost effective approach and deserves further development.
- 1.13. Marginalised groups need to be addressed more directly. Self help approaches should identify 'clusters' of problems and provide self help services targeted at specific client groups.
- 1.14. Intermediaries (community groups, youth workers, and others working with socially excluded groups and/or individuals) and advisers have a powerful role to play by incorporating problem solving skills training into general advice or client contact work. Although the legal problem faced by a community or client group may vary, there is a common problem solving process that can be applied each time. Intermediaries are in a strong position to pass on these skills to their clients and/or group when working together through a particular problem. Such skills would enable the client to manage problems more effectively, preventing problems clustering and/or spiralling.

- 1.15. Intermediaries need appropriate training to support self help material. The evaluation shows that the internet is potentially a good delivery platform for supporting intermediaries.
- 1.16. Many agencies, especially local agencies and community groups do not have the skills or resources to develop self help packages. The evaluation shows that Advicenow has good technical and production skills and worked well in partnership to develop self help materials and tools.

Conclusions

- 1.17. The project has proved that there are benefits of a self help approach to resolving legal problems, and showed the effectiveness of delivering self help materials and tools via the internet. It has also highlighted the need for problem solving skills for the general public, and the role of intermediaries and advisers in passing on these skills to their clients and supporting clients in assisted self help.
- 1.18. We will continue to provide the Tracker Tool and support materials on the Advicenow website as an integral part of our service. A further revised and simplified version of the Tracker Tool will shortly be made available taking into account the findings of the evaluation exercise. We will further revise the supporting material to incorporate the lessons of the evaluation.
- 1.19. We will take these ideas forward by developing projects working with specific client groups and the intermediaries working with them - community groups, advisers, youth workers etc
- 1.20. We will work with partners to focus on socially excluded groups and produce a range of material including:
 - material on the law and rights;
 - practical materials on how to go about dealing with a problem;
 - where to get help;
 - skills based materials on working out what your problem is, and how to manage your case including use of the Tracker Tool;
 - training and support materials for intermediaries.
- 1.21. We are keen to develop and evaluate an assisted self help or supported DIY project as an element of these projects. We envisage this as an internet based service where information will be supplemented by email advice with mentoring and peer support provided via a discussion forum. The project would be independently evaluated with partners using their client groups.
- 1.22. Our thanks to the Invest to Save Budget for funding, and to the Department of Constitutional Affairs for supporting the project.
- 1.23. During the course of the project, advicenow.org.uk won the Plain English Website Award for 2004, we are grateful for all our partners' support and contributions to the site.

(For copies of the full report please contact info@advicenow.org.uk)