

6. INFORMATION RETRIEVAL SYSTEMS

This section

- (a) describes methods of sourcing and gathering information;*
- (b) outlines methods of storing information to ensure efficient retrieval;*
- (c) summarises information retrieval procedures;*
- (d) describes the process of updating.*

In order to ensure a quality information service, the information provided should be **accurate**, **current**, **timely** and **relevant** to individual needs. Content, presentation and delivery should be youth-centred. Gathering the correct information and being able to retrieve it quickly and easily, when required, is central to the success of a Youth Information Centre.

Another important factor is the development of a system, which can be used by young people who may wish to retrieve their own information. In that regard, the ***Information Studies Module for Transition Year Students***, developed by the Transition Year Support Team and Dun Laoghaire Youth Information Centre, is an excellent tool for equipping young people with the skills necessary for sourcing and retrieving information, leading to personal autonomy and resourcefulness.

In this Section, the four main elements that make up a quality information system will be introduced and explored. To ensure an efficient and user-friendly information system, it is essential that these elements are properly developed and maintained, and that every staff member is trained in their use.

The elements are, as follows:

- (1) Sourcing & Gathering Information**
- (2) Storing Information**
- (3) Retrieving Information**
- (4) Updating Information**

(1) SOURCING & GATHERING INFORMATION

Sourcing and gathering information is a very time-consuming but essential task.

There are four important points to be considered in developing your information stock:

- ♦ ***Know your target audience and the type of information they need***

Consult with young people, parents, teachers and youth workers about the kind of information they require. Find out how information should be written, presented and distributed to optimise the number of young people who can benefit from your service.

There are various methods for consulting with your target group. These include comment cards in the Centre, user/ non-user surveys on the street, advisory panels or consultation meetings. The important thing is to provide a forum where young people can express what they want in a relaxed and supportive atmosphere.

- ♦ ***Be pro-active***

Be pro-active in your approach to identifying and meeting information needs, highlighting deadlines and promoting events or opportunities of interest to young people. Research new developments e.g. Minimum Wage rates or National Age Card.

- ♦ ***Be responsive***

Encourage young people to request information that may not be readily available but which can be researched, thus building up the information stock. Methods could include the provision of newspapers to young people so that they become aware of issues of interest to them. Comment Cards and surveys often draw out interesting topics as well as notices in the Centre encouraging young people to ask questions.

- ♦ ***Be Generalist***

The information stock should be generalist and contain information on subjects of interest to young people. The 18 categories outlined in the Classification System (see ***Storing Information***) is an excellent guide to the range and type of information that should be contained in your information stock.

Sourcing & Gathering Information – The Process

Listed below are some pointers for creating and developing the material in your information system:

- Contact relevant statutory, voluntary and local bodies for each subject, requesting copies of their information materials e.g. in the case of *Asylum Seekers/Refugees*:
 - *Contact the Reception & Integration Agency (Statutory);*
 - *Contact the Irish Refugee Council or Refugee Information Service (Voluntary);*
 - *Contact any relevant local organisations.*
- Request to be put on mailing lists;
- Attend any Open Days/exhibitions (e.g. *Higher Options, FÁS Opportunities*) to gain access to information;
- Scan national and local newspapers for any articles or advertisements related to youth issues/organisations;
- Obtain relevant supplements issued by newspapers and magazines. These are an excellent source of information and include *Education & Living* (Irish Times) and *Appointments* (Irish Independent);
- Attend relevant talks, seminars and workshops, where possible;
- Consult the ‘*Master Documents*’ listing, which is available from the Youth Information Resource Unit. This includes a list of essential books and directories on various subjects e.g. *Guide to Evening Classes in Dublin* (Wolfhound Press), *Applying to College* (Raymond Dunne).
- Log onto the Internet, which is a wonderful source of information if used correctly.

Surfing the Internet can be very time-consuming and often result in bad quality websites. To avoid this, it is recommended that you create a list of useful websites from newspaper reviews, or as listed on documentation produced by relevant organisations. As a useful starting point, look up the Youth Information Website www.youthinformation.ie which contains links to many useful websites of interest to young people.

- Obtain (or create your own) CD Databases as sources of information. They are advertised in organisational magazines or at Open Days.
- Co-ordinate and network with local services. This is a very useful way of pooling knowledge, and is an excellent way of finding out what is out there and how to source it.
- Keep your eyes and ears open, as being an Information Officer means always being alert to new announcements and developments.

(2) STORING INFORMATION

Storage is the second element in the process of setting up an information system. Here we will explore methods of storing information to ensure easy retrieval. The importance of proper storage cannot be emphasised enough, and should be instilled in all staff members. Training should be provided.

There are many methods of storing information including:

- *Files – in folders or box files;*
- *Filing Cabinets;*
- *Reference Shelves;*
- *Technology - Internet, databases, CD Roms, audiotapes.*

Where possible, and to ensure standardisation of the information system, it is important that, whatever method is being used, the system is developed so that every item of information, regardless of format, is cross referenced with the filing system as outlined below.

Filing System

The following are important steps in preparing information materials for storage so as to ensure easy retrieval from your filing system:

A. Classification

B. Indexing

C. Filing

A. Classification System

Information material should be organised according to the YIC Classification System. This Classification System has been specially developed for Youth Information Centres in the Irish network. It standardises the information system throughout the network and facilitates the transfer of information from the Youth Information Resource Unit to Centres as well as between Centres. It is important that all staff are trained on how to classify information in accordance with the YIC Classification System.

You will find a copy of the YIC Classification System at the back of the booklet, *Standards for Youth Information Centres*.

What is a Classification System?

A Classification System uses numbers to categorise and sub-categorise information subjects. This is done in order to collate or bring together similar information. Within the YIC Classification System there are eighteen categories of information:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. <i>Accommodation</i> | 2. <i>Careers</i> |
| 3. <i>Education</i> | 4. <i>Employment & Training</i> |
| 5. <i>Environment</i> | 6. <i>Europe</i> |
| 7. <i>Finance</i> | 8. <i>Health & Support Services</i> |
| 9. <i>Law & Justice</i> | 10. <i>Leisure</i> |
| 11. <i>Local</i> | 12. <i>Organisations - Miscellaneous</i> |
| 13. <i>Social/Political Issues</i> | 14. <i>Social Welfare</i> |
| 15. <i>Sport</i> | 16. <i>Tourism: Ireland</i> |
| 17. <i>Travel & Migration</i> | 18. <i>Youth work</i> |

The Classification numbers – What do they mean?

1. Every classification number consists of a number, a point, and then a second number e.g. 1.1, 4.5.
2. The number before the point is for a broad category e.g. “4” is the number for *Employment & Training*
3. The number after the point sub-categorises the information into more specific areas e.g. 4.9 is the number for *Employment Rights*.

It is always important to place such a number on every item of information ready for filing. This is known as classification.

B. Indexing

The Index is the key to the whole system - the starting point every time you are looking for, or wishing to file, information. There are two indexes that help you to access the information system: ***Alphabetical Index*** and ***Numerical Index*** (defined below). Both can be obtained from the Youth Information Resource Unit.

Keep the Indexes in a binder for easy access. After a while you will become familiar with some of the numbers but, even if you become familiar with all of them, you should still use the Index to ensure that you do not miss some relevant information.

Tip

You may find it useful for yourself and other staff members to put notes beside each Index Number indicating where this information is located within the Centre.

Alphabetical Index

This Index is arranged A-Z like a dictionary. When you look up a word, you should find a corresponding classification number. Categories are represented by bold print, sub-categories by normal print.

What if the word or subject you are looking for is not there?

If you are having difficulty in finding a subject, it may just be that you have not chosen the best word to look up, or that the subject may not be included in the YIC Information System. Maybe the word you are using is too specific e.g. if you look up *badminton*, you will not get very far, because the word is too specific. But if you look up *Sport*, you will discover a category ***15.2 Sports*** A-Z.

Numerical Index

The Numerical Index lists the categories and sub-categories in numerical order, from ***1. Accommodation*** to ***18. Youth Work***. Each number is a category or sub-category number of the Classification System. This Index is really for use by someone familiar with the Classification System. It is also useful for staff when preparing information for filing, adding new files, or deciding where to put new information.

Storing Information

Exercise

***WHAT CLASSIFICATION NUMBER WOULD YOU PUT ON
INFORMATION MATERIAL RELATING TO THE
FOLLOWING.....?***

1. Hostels in Cork

2. Applying for a widow's pension

3. Contacting the Ombudsman

6. Applying to University College Dublin

7. College Grant for Mature Students

8. Form E111

7. Becoming an Au Pair

C. Filing

The layout and presentation of the files is a significant factor in the easy retrieval of information. It is important that file navigation is made as simple as possible and that information held in files can be located quickly and efficiently. Remember that you may not be the only person who will be consulting the files – a young person, new staff member or parent needs to be able to locate information in a file as easily as yourself.

Preparing information for filing

Each item of information should be clearly marked with the date, the appropriate classification number and its source (i.e. the name of the agency, which provided it).

Layout of Files

1) Label / Title

Each file should be labelled on the outside with the classification number and heading appropriate for the information contained in the file e.g. *10.11 Summer Activities*.

2) Colour-coding

Where possible, each category should be colour-coded to facilitate easy use of the information system. For example, *Education* could be coded RED, with files and other information formats on this subject also RED, where possible.

3) Open Access

Where possible, files should be on open access to the public to facilitate independent browsing. Make clear on each file that the information, which it contains, is for *reference only* and draw attention to the photocopying facilities available for anyone requiring copies.

4) Layout

- *Contents Page* - There should be a Contents Page on the front of each file;
- *Plastic Pockets* - When dealing with paper material, it is advisable to use plastic pockets for protection;
- *Dividers* – Are useful if you wish to sub-categorise within a file.

(3) RETRIEVING INFORMATION

You need to retrieve information from your system – where do you start?

Familiarise yourself with the files

Before you are ever asked a question, it is recommended that you familiarise yourself with the location of the files and other information formats. A useful exercise is to spend time studying the files – getting to know their location, and opening them up to find out their content.

The independent user

As mentioned earlier, it is important, where possible, to encourage young people to retrieve information, themselves. It is essential, therefore, that the system is developed to facilitate its use by them. Reference has already been made to the usefulness of the *Information Studies Module for Transition Year Students* in helping to equip young people with the necessary skills to retrieve their own information.

Consult Index

The indexes will give you a list of file headings and numbers. The headings should give you an idea about which files you want. If you are in doubt as to whether a particular file will have what you want, the simplest thing is to take out the file and have a look.

What information is required?

Information may be found in various locations within the Information System. It depends on the question you have been asked and the detail of the answer required.

Let us take a look at three examples:

I want to become a chef – how do I go about it?

Looking up *Careers* in the Index will direct you to the *Careers* files in the filing system. The file on *Catering* will provide you with information on how to become a chef and places which offer the relevant courses.

I'm looking for the number of Barnardos.

You will usually find what you want in the *Comhairle Directory of National Voluntary Organisations* or the Local Directory instead of in the files. However, required information on some major national or local organisations may be found in the files with the classification number *12. Organisations – Miscellaneous A-Z*.

What am I entitled to as a Lone Parent?

If you need information on social welfare, it is always best to consult the Comhairle Citizens Information Database.

Approaches to Retrieving Information

There are many different approaches to retrieving information from the Information System:

- 1. Consult the Indexes;*
- 2. Check Files, Box Files, Folders;*
- 3. Check CDs/ Databases/ Internet;*
- 4. Check the Reference Section;*
- 5. Check other Sources.*

1. Consult the Indexes

This will give you the file number where the information is most likely to be located.

2. Check Files, Box Files, Folders

When you have the file number, you should then be able to locate the file by looking at the sides of the files/ boxes/ books or other material on the shelves. You may then remove the file from the shelf to read through it.

REMEMBER: All information in the files is for reference only. NEVER, give away any of these items.

You may allow a user to study the file, photocopy items from the file, or give out spare copies of documents which it contains. When you are finished with a

file, always return it to its box, ensuring that all the files in the boxes are in numerical order.

Don't forget to check the Filing Tray for any new information that may have come in and is not yet filed. Often information is requested following articles/ advertisements in local newspapers, or radio announcements.

3. Check CDs/ Databases/ Internet

Information technology, especially the Internet, is often an excellent source of the most up-to-date information on a particular subject. It is also an excellent resource when faced with some unusual query, which may not be covered in your paper files.

When answering queries, it is strongly recommended that you also give the enquirer the addresses of any relevant websites so that they can research further information on the requested topic, themselves.

4. Check the Reference Section

The Reference Section contains books, directories, reports or other generalist material. It will often hold information, which may not be available in the files. The Reference Section may also contain material, which is useful for background reading on a particular subject. It is recommended that the Index be developed so that the files are cross-referenced with the books.

5. Other sources of Information

- ◆ Telephone Directories/Yellow Pages - for names, addresses, telephone numbers;
- ◆ Magazines e.g. Consumer Choice;
- ◆ Leaflets on shelves/stands;
- ◆ Directories of local clubs & organisations – for details of voluntary groups;
- ◆ Comhairle Directory of National Voluntary Organisations;
- ◆ Noticeboards – forthcoming events;
- ◆ Newspapers - local and national;
- ◆ Colleagues

Information Retrieval

Exercise 1

WHERE WOULD I FIND THE FOLLOWING.....?

Please indicate where you would find information on the following:

1. Grants for post-graduate students
2. U.S.A. Visas
3. Accommodation in London
4. Setting up a courier service
5. How to become a dress designer
6. Official age at which one can get married
7. Minimum age of workers
8. Development Work Abroad
9. Judo classes
10. Youth exchanges

Information Retrieval

Exercise 2

(Please write your answers below)

Gillian is 19 years old and studying at the Institute of Technology. In order to improve her French, she wishes to go to work in Paris for the Summer.

LIST ALL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

1. What kind of work can she do?
2. What information can you give her on accommodation?
3. What preparation does she need to make e.g. what to bring?
4. Besides France, what other country could she go to?
5. Are you happy with the way you dealt with the query?

(4) UPDATING INFORMATION

Out-of-date information is dangerous! It can seriously mislead. Spend as much time as possible updating the material in your information stock. Always put a date on any material you add to the files. Add clear, explanatory notes, where necessary e.g. if you have rung up for an update and it is on its way.

Updating Process

Updating Files

Check the information in your file and discard any out-of-date material. Replace with new and more appropriate data. Any additions to the files should be appropriately numbered (classified), dated and placed in the correct box.

Requesting New Information Material

This may require telephoning organisations, searching newspapers / magazines, or attending talks / workshops/ exhibitions to acquire new material for the file.

If you are updating a large category, which involves contacting many organisations for the same type of information, it may be useful to design a standard letter to send to all. This saves both time and resources.

Methodical & Systematic Approach

Ensure that updating is carried out in a methodical and systematic way so that information is up-to-date at the time that a young person needs it. It is useful to create a timetable showing when each subject area will be updated during the year. A suggested timetable follows.

Sample Updating Timetable

January

CAO
Organisations
Nursing Applications
Summer Work in U.S./ J1 Visa

February

Countries
Summer Work/ Travel Abroad
Voluntary Work Abroad
Visas/ Work Permits

March

Post Leaving Cert. Colleges
Post Leaving Cert. Courses

April

Postgraduate Courses
Summer Activities
Publications

May

Youth Group Activities for Summer
Funding/ Grant Forms/ Applications
English Language Courses

June/ July

Tourism in Ireland
Hostels
Events/ Festivals

August

Leaving Cert. Results/
Repeat Leaving Cert.
Evening Classes/Distance Education
Accommodation List

September

Local Information
- maps, timetables
Part-time Work
Sports/ Leisure Groups

October

Irish Prospectuses
UCAS, Study in U.K.

November

Careers

December

Spring Evening Classes