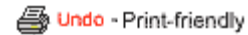


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# General Characteristics of Effective Dissemination and Utilization

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Effective dissemination and utilization strategies are keys to conducting successful program improvement. The strategies suggested are reflective of those found to be effective through both research and field-based experience.

## Components of Effective Dissemination Strategies

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The one-way flow of written information and mechanical, "traditional" dissemination approaches have not proven to be effective in encouraging the adoption and implementation of new programs and strategies. NCDDR's

experience and the literature concerning dissemination strategies that do work (see, for example Westbrook & Lumbley, 1990; Pollard, 1989; Pollard and Rood, 1989; Mace-Matluck, 1986) lead to the perceptions that to be effective, dissemination systems need the following characteristics:

- They are oriented toward the needs of the user, incorporating the kinds and levels of information needed into the forms and language preferred by the user.
- They use varied dissemination methods, including written information, electronic media, and person-to-person contact.
- They include both proactive and reactive dissemination channels - that is, they include information that users have identified as important, and they include information that users may not know to request but that they are likely to need. Clear channels are established for users to make their needs and priorities known to the disseminating agency.
- They recognize and provide for the "natural flow" of the four levels of dissemination that have been identified as leading to utilization: spread, exchange, choice, and implementation.
- They draw upon existing resources, relationships, and networks to the maximum extent possible while building new resources as needed by users.
- They include effective quality control mechanisms to assure that information to be included in the system is accurate, relevant, and representative.
- They include sufficient information so that the reader/user can determine the basic principles underlying specific practices and the settings in which these practices may be used most productively.
- They establish linkages to resources that may be needed to implement the information - usually referred to as technical assistance.

## Utilization is the Goal

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The underlying reason to collect and disseminate information is to assure that it is used in reaching decisions, making changes, or taking other specific actions designed to improve programs. That is, the goal of dissemination is utilization, or implementation of effective program strategies. Facilitating the utilization of information is a complex process; many barriers exist, both in steps necessary for implementation and in the skills, attitudes, and awareness levels of people and organizations. Research demonstrates that the following factors are related to achieving the utilization of information:

- The information provided must include details of content, context, and resources needed before implementation can be planned in sufficient detail (University of Wisconsin-Stout, 1989; Pollard, 1989; Mace-Matluck, 1986; Fullan, 1985).
- The individual needs of information users will vary according to the levels of use and stages of personal concern demonstrated (Hall & Hord, 1987; Carrillo, Lumbley & Westbrook, 1984).
- Information users will more effectively implement change if they, themselves, understand the process and the flow of activities that will be involved (Pollard & Rood, 1989; Hall & Hord, 1987).
- Programs and practices must be adapted to meet the particular needs of each individual organization (Deal, 1986; Corbet et al., 1984).
- All parties involved in the utilization or implementation process must be able to contribute to planning (Westbrook & Botterbusch, 1989; Lieberman & Miller, 1986).
- Users will accept assistance, information, and ideas from sources they believe to be credible and trustworthy (Fullan, 1985; Baker, 1984; Carrillo, Lumbley & Westbrook, 1990).
- The utilization process requires time and support from beginning to end (Hall & Hord, 1987; Fullan, 1982). It also requires personal involvement; outside organizations must provide some level of in-person support including follow-up and ongoing feedback and exchange (Westbrook, 1990; Fullan, 1985; Louis et al. 1984).

# A Philosophical Framework for Dissemination and Utilization

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Experience and literature support the need for a philosophical or conceptual framework for dissemination and utilization processes. The following major elements apply to the work of the NCDDR with NIDRR grantees:

1. Dissemination is far more than the simple distribution of paper or products; it is a process requiring a careful match among (a) the creation of products or knowledge, and the context of that creation, (b) the target audiences, and (c) the content, media, formats, and language used in getting the outcomes into the hands (and minds) of those target audiences (see Exhibit 4).
2. The goal of all dissemination should be utilization. Utilization may mean different things to different members of a target audience; in some cases, it may mean rejection of a product or research finding. The critical element of utilization is that the research outcome must be critically and thoroughly digested, and the individual must fit the new information with her or his prior understandings and experience.
3. One of the most effective ways to increase utilization - and to improve the quality and relevance of research - is to involve potential users in planning and implementation of the research design itself.
4. Effective dissemination and utilization require an understanding of the change process.
5. Effective dissemination is critically linked to its timeliness and comprehensiveness.
6. Effective dissemination of disability research requires careful planning and effort throughout the life of a research project.
7. Dissemination is a process that requires ongoing support and personal intervention to achieve utilization.
8. All NIDRR grantees share in the responsibility to disseminate their project results to all appropriate target audiences, and in accessible formats.

## Dissemination Issues

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The effective dissemination process is dependent upon and influenced by an array of environmental and individual user characteristics. Effectiveness requires the disseminator to be aware of how the user, source, content, context, and medium are configured and how they will directly influence utilization. Exhibit 1: Elements and Issues Related to the Dissemination Process describes major areas for consideration.

## Technical Assistance as a Key to Utilization

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As indicated above, information alone generally is not enough to assure that a new approach will be implemented successfully and in ways that meet the unique circumstances of each specific user. Technical assistance - in the form of consultations, specially tailored materials and information, training, and/or demonstrations - is usually needed to help adapt strategies and to address the barriers involved in the implementation process. Westbrook and Botterbusch (1989) have identified characteristics of technical assistance that promote the utilization of information. These characteristics include:

- The entire organization's needs are considered in planning the implementation of new programs or strategies. Goals for target unit(s) and the entire organization are integrated into one comprehensive plan.
- Administrators, managers, and direct service staff persons are all involved in planned activities. Management involves staff members in shaping changes for implementation.
- A written plan, detailing the who, what, when, where and how much of technical assistance activities, is developed and signed by the major parties involved.
- Measurable outcomes are identified before technical assistance and implementation activities are begun and the methods of long-term data collection and evaluation are determined.
- Open, ongoing and integrated interactions between the community and organization are used to assess implementation activities.
- Technical assistance is perceived as a routine method to stimulate growth, development, and improvement; technical assistance is viewed as a part of a larger set of activities aimed at meeting the organization's goals and objectives.
- The technical assistance provider uses a variety of activities to assist with implementing the new program or approach.

## Conclusion

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Effective dissemination and utilization efforts are not easy and mechanical. The effectiveness of these efforts depends upon the degree to which the disseminator tailors information to the end-user and recognizes that the use of such information usually requires the provision of assistance to successfully negotiate implementation.

## Exhibit 1

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### Elements And Issues Related To The Dissemination Process

#### USER

- User's readiness to change
- Format and level of information needed
- Level of contextual information needed
- Perceived relevance to own needs
- Dissemination media preferred
- Information sources trusted

#### SOURCE

- Perceived competence
- Credibility of experience
- Credibility of motive
- Sensitivity to user concerns
- Relationship to other sources trusted by users

#### CONTENT

- Credibility of research and development methodology
- Credibility of outcomes
- Comprehensiveness of outcomes
- Utility and relevance for users
- Capacity to be described in terms understandable to users

- Cost effectiveness
- Research design and procedures

## CONTEXT

- Relationship between outcomes and existing knowledge or products
- Current issues in the field
- Competing knowledge or products
- General economic climate

## MEDIUM

- Physical capacity to reach intended users
- Timelines of access
- Accessibility and ease of use, user friendliness
- Flexibility
- Reliability
- Credibility
- Cost effectiveness
- Clarity and attractiveness of the information "package"

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