
New Network Connects Businesses with State Libraries

by Paul Gilster

Anyone who thinks of libraries as musty places peopled only by bibliophiles and students has missed out on a major trend in the way business information is gathered and disseminated. Business people now have access to a statewide network of computerized information growing up within the library system. Although still in its infancy, this North Carolina Information Network holds rich implications for the way business will be conducted in the 1990s and beyond.

Today's service-oriented economy thrives on timely access to the kinds of information that libraries routinely compile. Add computerized networking capabilities to a statewide system of private, public and university libraries, and you open new possibilities for research. Combine that with a concerted effort by state government to reach potential vendors for goods and services, and you've created a new business medium.

The North Carolina Information Network, which began operating in October, is a creation of the Department of Cultural Resources' Division of State Library. Howard McGinn, assistant state librarian, said the system differs from computer networks in other states.

"Elsewhere, these systems are designed to allow librarians to talk to other librarians," he said. "That's not the way it should work. The end-user is really the citizen and the businesses he runs. Our programs use the libraries as local outlets, or nodes, to reach the people."

Linking libraries statewide is no small challenge even with today's technology. McGinn said that the Division of State Library saw no need to re-invent the wheel. Comprehensive networking systems already were available on a contractual basis, including Western Union's EasyLink service, which became one of the two vendors of information used by the NCIN. Using EasyLink, the state began sending educational, business, administrative and financial information to all libraries within the system.

Participating libraries sign on to EasyLink and are channeled directly into the bulletin board

system maintained by the state. The bulletin boards began as highly specialized operations. One called NCLIBS contains a general summary of news about libraries and librarians in North Carolina; NCCAL lists library meetings in the state. But the range of information available widened almost immediately. The NCGOV board summarizes economic and financial news along with legislative and regulatory information; NCNEWS provides legislative updates.

Other state agencies soon began to take notice of the potential offered by the computer network. Drew Harbinson, assistant to the state purchasing officer for the Department of Administration's Division of Purchase and Contracts, had spent the last year and a half looking into computer networking for the agency. When he heard what the Division of State Library was doing, he realized that the NCIN could solve a major problem for his department.

North Carolina buys more than \$800 million in goods and services each year, and it's the job of the Division of Purchase and Contracts to handle these transactions. To publicize the government's needs, the division has been required by statute to publish the North Carolina Purchasing Directory. This publication, which appears every two weeks and costs subscribers \$40 a year, also carries notice of highway construction jobs for the Department of Transportation and building bids for the Office of State Construction.

The problem with the Purchasing Directory is that by the time it reaches the prospective vendor, it's often out of date. Also, it fails to reach a wide range of potential bidders. "There seems to be a core base of vendors who continue to bid and do a good job for the state," Harbinson said. "But to a great extent this group is limited to bidders in the geographical area of Raleigh. We want to expand accessibility to all of North Carolina."

The result, announced by Governor James G. Martin at a June 18 news conference, is an Automated Purchasing Directory carried by the NCIN's bulletin board facilities. The computerized directory will allow listings from the departments of Administration and Transportation to appear twice a week throughout the state. About 70 of

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North Carolina's 100 counties currently have nodes for the service. The remaining counties are expected to come on-line within a few months.

But the Department of Administration is not the only state agency that has found the uses of the NCIN intriguing. Jean Overton, director for small business at the Department of Community Colleges, presides over 34 Small Business Centers in the community college system throughout the state. Overton is happy to see computers used to spread the word about opportunities for doing business with state government, and she is anxious to develop the Small Business Centers as nodes within the system.

"We'd like to do more seminars in 1987-88 on how to do business with the state," Overton said. "We want to get more involved in the computer network. Businesses in search of a contract need a local base, and that's why the Small Business Center network is so valuable. We're trying to get the business community to realize that the library is a very valuable resource to them."

Leading the way among community colleges in this regard is Carteret Technical College, which has emerged as a model for the kind of services both the Department of Community Colleges and the NCIN are promoting. Ed Shearin, director of the Learning Research Center at the college, works closely with the Small Business Center on campus, using computers to track information requests from the community. Shearin plans to promote the Automated Purchasing Directory through articles in the chamber of commerce newsletter and through phone calls directly to potential bidders.

Shearin said he is particularly interested in the research capabilities offered by computers in generating business information. "Today, for example, an area businessman wanted to look at a demographic survey of Beaufort and Harkers Island to help him plan a small business. The search on the computer took me less than two minutes to perform. The material—a five-page summary of just about any demographic material you can imagine—will be here in two days."

Statewide access to major databases such as DIALOG, which made Shearin's search successful, is now assured through the NCIN. Using Easy-Link's sister service, Infomaster, the library network can tie in to more than 700 databases, including major information vendors such as DIALOG, BRS and Questel. The materials in those databases otherwise would be available only through large public or corporate libraries. The library system thus becomes not only a depository but a broadcaster of information.

While the Infomaster database makes a wealth of scientific, technical and economic materials available to the NCIN, the other half of the program opens the extensive holdings of North Carolina's own libraries for search and retrieval by computer. When the Division of State Library first contemplated a computer network, McGinn realized that a major problem for less-developed areas is the concentration of information in large libraries, usually in the major cities. Moving books through interlibrary loan methods is time consuming, and the search could hardly be comprehensive.

To remedy this problem, many of the state's larger libraries had begun to participate in a computerized database offered by an Ohio firm called OCLC Inc. Through its Online Union Catalog, OCLC maintains bibliographic records for all the major libraries in the country. McGinn worked with OCLC to create a statewide computer catalog—the North Carolina Online Union Catalog—listing some 5.8 million records, with more being added all the time. A separate catalog of serial publication also is available through the network. This catalog is now available through the NCIN.

The system is easy to use. At any of the 175 nodes throughout the state in public, private or university libraries, the researcher uses the facility's personal computer and modem to enter the network. Searching by author or title, he can locate the book he needs wherever it is in the state and place an electronic loan request for it. Serial publications can be searched, too, and articles soon will be routinely sent via telefax machine to their destination at minimal charge. Some 22 of the machines are to be put in place across the state this summer.

"The implications here for rural development are phenomenal," McGinn said. "We're not shy about saying this. You could literally have the same access at the top of Mount Mitchell that you would have right here in Research Triangle Park. And access to information means the ability to compete economically."

At the same time that the amount of information available has increased geometrically, the cost has actually dropped, due to the Division of State Library's decision to be a contractor of services rather than a creator of them. Jane Williams, state librarian of North Carolina, pointed out that any other method would have been considerably more expensive. "The important thing is that we're contracting with OCLC and Western Union rather than putting millions into a mainframe here and a big staff and programming. We've done it with very, very little money." 