

Whither Goest EDIN?



The casual reader might first ask, “What is EDIN and who cares where it goes?” However, up until very recently nearly a thousand people in Indiana had access codes to dial into the Economic Development Information Network and peruse economic and demographic data about Indiana and its counties from a wide assortment of source agencies. Thousands more benefited from the availability of this information, as it was republished and retransmitted in other forms throughout the state.

We can’t trace EDIN back to the days of the Garden (for which it was not named), but it did evolve as a revolutionary way of accessing statistics back in the 1970s, when it was called INDIRS. People could go to selected public libraries in Indiana and ask the reference librarian to pull up population and income figures for their county. At the time, a modem going at 300 baud was considered fast, since it doubled the speed of the previously available 150-baud gadgets. “Dumb” terminals were the name of the game, printing out on thermal paper much like the early fax machines, with which more of us are familiar.

By the 1980s, EDIN was able to take advantage of personal computer technology and became available—at the high speeds of 1200 and 2400 baud—to a broader range of individuals in government and industry, the primary users of the data. For people who needed current economic and demographic statistics about their communities, EDIN made it possible to garner that information quickly, any time of the day or week, and use it in a way that allowed for electronic manipulation. Computer-savvy users

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could use the data directly as input to forecasting models or to create community profiles. Those wanting a more “print-oriented” approach could make the standard tables look better by using a word processor (anyone remember Wordstar?) and a laser printer.

By the mid-1990s, we saw the handwriting on the wall and it spelled out W-E-B. The World Wide Web made it much easier to find information, with more attractive formatting and downloading options. We began to develop a new process for making the data we collected from other agencies available dynamically or interactively via the Web. The terms “dynamic” and “interactive” are used to describe the process by which the Web user submits a request or query to the database and the database ships back the information in a basic Web page format. And all of

this can happen more quickly than we can describe it; in the best of worlds, it should take only nanoseconds for the page to come back to the user.

However, we are focusing on designs that accommodate the broad range of technology our current and potential users have available on their desktops. Modem speed is an issue, because some users have modems as slow as 14.4K baud and other users have direct Internet connections (bypassing dial-up to a Net service) as fast as T1 (1 million kilobytes per second) or higher.



Browser type is an issue as well, although the playing field here is generally competition between Netscape and Microsoft’s Internet Explorer. However, even between those two brands of browsers, users can have versions as old as 1.5 or as current as the company may have released today. Older browsers support fewer technological feats of cyber-wizardry, so we must be careful in our design not to exclude folks who are just plain happy with their older versions. Because most of these browsers are free nowadays, we encourage anyone using the Web to download more current versions, just to keep up with the groundswell toward better and faster bells and whistles.

Content and User Needs Become Top Dog...

Technological whiz-bangs are not our focus. The power of the World Wide Web is that it is easier to use and much easier to look at. We want to continue to do what we’ve been doing for nearly three decades.

A survey of current users is under way to determine which data series are most crucial and how often they are used. Preliminary results show that employment, income, age of the population, consumer price indices, and earnings of workers by industry type are all very important. A prototype, or beta test, version of the new system will be accessible sometime this fall. Current users of EDIN will be notified of its availability as soon as possible; potential users will find it by hearing about it from other users, reading about it in promotional materials, or doing a Web search. Though the database will be somewhat small at first, we are working to ensure that it has the most needed data available first.

Comments or questions? Please don’t hesitate to e-mail us at rogersc@indiana.edu to discuss them.

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