

# Performance indicators for the ISTAR Project

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## Abstract

The ISTAR Networks pilot project, supported by the European Commission DG EMPL formerly DG V), was completed successfully on 27 April 2000. ISTAR was funded under the Regional Information Society Initiatives (RISI2) programme over a two-and-a-half year period, to a value of some 2 million Euros. The three pilot regions in which it implemented services were Imathia (Central Macedonia, Greece), Western Education and Libraries Board (Northern Ireland) and Thuringen (Germany).

Since it began in November 1997, ISTAR tested on a practical basis key new roles for public libraries, working in active partnerships with other regional agencies in the public and private sector, in supporting economies of Europe's 'peripheral' regions by delivering cost-effective information and training services to users. **Performance indicators were central to the project's success because:**

- The funding body [the Directorate of the European Commission] responsible for Employment, NOT libraries, wanted proof that its own objectives had been met and
- It was experimental at that time to provide these services through public libraries and important for the future that they be seen to have succeeded.

The tools which were used to monitor activity in each region, include:

- Statistics - to assess take-up e.g. number of users, of training courses, sites hosted etc.
- Case studies - e.g. to demonstrate skills improvement
- Surveys (questionnaires) - e.g. to test ease of use, skills improvement, impact on users
- Baseline surveys were carried out in each region
- Focus Groups - to test user reaction in more depth.

*ISTAR continues to function as a not for profit service. More information can be found at [www.istar.org](http://www.istar.org).*

## Introduction

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ISTAR set out to provide a model for promoting awareness and extending access to networks and basic 'Information Society' services through public libraries to SME, the self-employed, teleworkers and distance learners in three Objective 1 regions - Imathia (Greece), Thüringen (Germany) and the Western Education and Libraries Board - WELB (Northern Ireland). A region with advanced capability (Essex County in the United Kingdom) was a resource base for expertise and project management skills during the project, working in partnership with a private sector subcontractor, Robert Davies.

The project introduced and tested services in all three implementation regions. It achieved its objectives in almost all respects. Its findings are perhaps especially relevant in view of the recent launch of the European Commission strategy for jobs in the new knowledge economy, at the initiative of Commissioner Anna Diamantopoulou (Employment and Social Affairs). Among the specific recommendations of this report are the establishment by the end of 2001 public Internet access points, plus on-site information society literacy training in all communities e.g. libraries, post offices etc.

## The Regional Context

ISTAR partners which originally formed the network within each region varied according to the institutional and economic make-up of the region:

### IMATHIA

Prefecture  
Veria Public Library  
Imathia Chamber of Commerce  
Office of Industrial Development, Naousa  
Trade Union Labour Institute, Veria  
Municipality of Plati (library)

### WELB

Western Education and Library Board  
North West College of Further and Higher Education  
Ulster American Folk Park  
HMP Magilligan Prison

### THÜRINGEN

Seven local municipalities and their libraries (Erfurt, Gera, Gotha, Greiz, Ilmenau, Meiningen, Nordhausen)  
Landesfachstelle für Öffentliche Bibliotheken (Consulting Agency)  
Thüringen Chamber of Commerce  
Adult Education Centre

Within each participating region, a Regional Management Team was assembled, including participating and contributing partners within each region, together with a parallel Regional Technical Working Group.

Much of the work of ISTAR was undertaken through Inter-Regional Task Groups consisting of technical specialists from each of the project partners with specific tasks allocated within the overall workplan. Such Groups were established to deal with issues service specification, training, promotion and publicity and performance measurement and to maximise the sharing of experience and inter-regional learning.

Although all partner regions signed up to the initial objectives, there were in the early stages, considerable differences about priorities for action, and about how to tackle local project management. In Imathia, for example, so slender was the availability of services delivered successfully through ICT in the region, that the main task of the Regional Project Manager was to raise and sustain belief at political and private sector level that the project would succeed in bringing access to these facilities through the library service. By the end of the Feasibility and Definition phase (and with a new Central Library due to open in Veria during July 1999), that belief already commanded support at the local and regional level, with services being formally launched by the Greek Minister of Culture in October 1999. Indeed, local and national politicians and MEPs in

all 4 regions involved have demonstrated strong interest in and support for the project, illustrated by similarly high-profile service launches taking place in Northern Ireland and Germany.

## The ISTAR Services

Following a one-year preparation phase encompassing feasibility, definition, marketing, specification, training and procurement activities, an ISTAR Network centre plus 'nodes' was set up in each region. Services were launched and promoted to target communities in each region. A full year's pilot operation of services was been completed with close monitoring and evaluation. Results show that there has been a measurable increase in awareness and take-up of network and other 'Information Society' services relevant to each regional economy.

ISTAR services as defined, fall into 4 broad groupings containing 16 separate categories, each with their own specific target groups in the different regions:

### GROUP A – AWARENESS RAISING

Computer Awareness Sessions  
Office packages - awareness sessions  
Internet Taster Sessions  
Electronic Imaging

### GROUP B – TRAINING PACKAGES

Training in specific office applications  
E-Mail Training  
WEB site design  
Self-Tutored Core Skills  
Effective website searching

### GROUP C – PAID SERVICES

Use of Workstations.  
WEB site hosting  
Vide Conferencing  
Electronic Image Capture/Processing

### GROUP D – INFORMATION PROVISION

Access to Business Information  
Access to Partners' databases  
Access to specific information

Services were introduced at different times in different regions and even at different service points within regions according to local operational and financial circumstances. The characteristics of the regions differ - settlements in Imathia, for example are small as are total catchment populations. The number and characteristics of ISTAR service points also differ from region to region. Not all regions planned to offer all services. Equally, services began to change in response to local needs.

Performance Indicators – Problems and Solutions

The project faced a number of problems in relation to performance indicators. Firstly, the project’s paymasters were interested in employment outcomes for specific target groups. For purposes of international comparison and reporting it was agreed to collect data primarily by employment status on the following groups into which all ISTAR users would fall:

- Self-employed
- Employed people extending/updating skills
- Unemployed seeking work or updating skills
- Looking after home [includes women considering rejoining the labour force]
- Retired
- Students
- School
- Further and higher education.

Public libraries do not usually evaluate the effect of their services in such detail nor attempt to target their marketing so precisely.

An obvious problem arising from this situation was that traditional public library indicators [members/visits/loans] would not be good enough – new indicators would need to be devised.

This in turn created a need for standardisation between all the project partners on:

- Service definitions
- Indicators for each service
- Data collection methods and timing.

In selecting performance indicators, the project team took the following into account:

- Cost effectiveness [could we afford to collect the evidence/was it worth the cost of collection?]
- Importance [did it tell us anything important]
- Project aims [could we demonstrate that these were met]
- Audiences/stakeholders [principally the Commission, local politicians, local managers but also the wider European audience which needed convincing of the usefulness of public libraries or of the appropriateness of our chosen activities]
- The different ISTAR services on offer
- Both quality and quantity as appropriate.

Methods Employed By The ISTAR Project Partners

For each of the services to be provided, a standard definition was drafted together with its performance indicators as in the following example:

Methods of acquiring data are indicated:

- D = diary with totals.**
- S = survey.**
- N = number- may arise from diary or otherwise.**
- C = case studies.**

**Table 1:**  
**Computer Awareness Sessions** **Wa01, Va01, Ta03**

<b>Brief Description</b>	Short taster sessions (45-60 minutes), basic operations e.g. using the keyboard and the mouse, basic introduction to applications. Support on a one-to-one basis or in small groups, maximum size 4.
<b>Objectives of service</b>	To provide local, easily accessible opportunities for members of the public to achieve a basic level of literacy in computer operation and raise awareness of computer applications.
<b>Target groups</b>	All
<b>Targets and Performance indicators</b>	Number of sessions [d] Number of attendees [d] Ease of use of service [s] Skills improvement <sup>1</sup> [s, c]

It was recognised that it would be difficult to use surveys effectively for certain key groups, so **focus groups** were used to get the views of the following groups:

- Independent learners
- ISTAR staff
- Representatives of small business
- Unemployed people

A total of 6 focus group sessions were conducted in the partner libraries of the 3 regions. They aimed to cover groups of people who were important targets of the ISTAR project but for which it would not have been possible to obtain representative samples for a questionnaire action. The focus groups were conducted by library staff, none of whom had done this before. It proved to be a pleasurable and rewarding experience.

This is an example of the kind of feedback received from representatives of small businesses:

- ISTAR improved their perception of the value of the library

- The library can play a key role in heightening perception in the community about the value and use of ICT
- They recognised the importance of the fact that its services are available to ALL and thought services should remain free of charge
- ISTAR in the library helps reduce workers' fears of new technology and can be a key resource for job-seekers and those seeking to develop new skills, leading to economic benefit for the whole community
- ISTAR improved their surfing skills and allowed them to make more productive use of the Internet
- ISTAR also refined their perceptions of the value and possibilities of e-commerce and caused them to progress such developments in their companies more rapidly than they would otherwise have done
- ISTAR also enhanced the value of traditional library services [e.g. inter-library loans]
- The business websites created by ISTAR were thought to be of good quality but they had not been effectively submitted to the major search engines
- For very small businesses, ISTAR provides crucial support in the early stages of their IT development
- BUT the success of ISTAR was sometimes a problem [too much noise, not enough machines, need for an "instant access" machine].
- Inability to use services charged for on the net is a problem
- Library could do more to provide specialised portals
- Need for longer library opening hours

## ISTAR Pilot Case Studies

The purpose of the case studies was to provide evidence of the effects of the ISTAR services on individuals in the main target groups in a way that has impact at the human level. All the libraries were asked to help find good case studies and were encouraged to use them as appropriate in local publicity. The case studies were grouped under the following headings:

ISTAR helps people find work

ISTAR succeeds where conventional methods have failed

ISTAR helps people improve their skills

ISTAR strengthens families and friendships

ISTAR builds people's confidence

ISTAR helps people at work

ISTAR helps ensure social inclusion

Here is an example of our style of case study:

"ISTAR helps people find work."

Mrs E. makes a fresh start.

"I was completing a qualification and could not see how I could use it in Meiningen, so I decided to try other local towns, but it did not occur to me to try Munich, which is where I have happily ended up thanks to the Internet and Meiningen library.

I was afraid of the Internet but signed up for a half-hour introduction that led to many more hours surfing. Eventually I found the right job on the Internet, applied, was interviewed and accepted, but the job was in Munich, a long way off. Next problem was to find a flat and for 3 or 4 weeks I was in the library every day, surfing the net for a flat. The library staff supported me all the way and we succeeded in finding what I needed.

I have had only good experiences from the Internet and hope that many other job seekers try this route. My thanks go to the ISTAR staff. Without their help and support I might have given up along the way."

## Baseline and exit questionnaires

Partners decided to use a baseline survey and a final survey. All partners planned to register users for ISTAR services which provided an opportunity to conduct the baseline survey, aimed mainly at collecting demographic information and identifying ICT skills levels. Each partner aimed for 500 completed surveys and there was a rolling start as services were launched. Partners translated the forms into German and Greek. The exit sample was conducted at the end of the pilot period.

## Monitoring and coordination

Because this was an international project, we created a monitoring mechanism independent of the service providers. The monitoring process served:

- To improve overall quality and
- To improve project cohesion and international learning.

Two monitoring visits took place in each region.

## Diary/collection of numerical data

Diaries were maintained at all ISTAR service points to collect the data specified. A sample diary layout was devised because all partners needed to collect the same data but they were free to design their own forms if they wished and use the technology they preferred. The diary was designed to contain all income information from all ISTAR services but partners could compile the financial data in other ways if this was more convenient. The diary data was brought together at a central point in each region for monitoring and reporting purposes.

## ISTAR pilot project results

RISI II projects needed to be evaluated against the 'four pillars' of employability, entrepreneurship, adaptability and equality of opportunity. In designing and implementing its own evaluation scheme, ISTAR sought to address questions such as the impact of services on: the skills gap, the labour force, the economy, local companies, the number of people with new skills - and what skills these were, how these related to the local economic strategy/skills gaps, the number of trainees who got jobs and a wide range of other issues.

The tools which were used to monitor activity in each region, include:

- Statistics - to assess take-up e.g. number of users, of training courses, sites hosted etc.
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- Surveys (questionnaires) - e.g. to test ease of use skills improvement, impact on users
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## Summary of results

The case studies show that ISTAR:

Helped people find work  
Improved their skills  
Strengthened families and friendships  
Improved confidence  
Improved social cohesion and  
Helped people at work.

The focus groups:

Supported the work of the project  
Demonstrated that it had met its objectives  
Made some valid suggestions for improvements and  
Overwhelmingly supported ISTAR's continuation.

The exit survey demonstrated that ISTAR:

Continued to reach its chosen targets groups  
Achieved high satisfaction ratings for its services  
Improved the skills of its users  
Was successful in helping people find work  
Was useful for business purposes  
Encouraged people to learn more about computers and to use them more  
Provided people with valuable information

The statistical reports show that ISTAR:

Was continuing to draw in customers and to grow at a rapid rate.

## Note

1. The baseline survey will provide a measure of skills at the outset. The final survey will indicate skills at the end. The difference will be the measure of skills improvement.

