

# **2004 Montana Legislator Computer Use Survey Results**

Prepared for  
The Legislative Branch Computer System Planning Council  
by  
Lois Menzies and Hank Trenk

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## **Introduction**

At the request of the Legislative Branch Computer System Planning Council, the Legislative Services Division conducted a computer use survey of Montana legislators. The purpose of the survey was to assess how legislators currently use computers, identify if there is a need for additional computing resources for conducting legislative business, and, if so, how to best meet that need. Among the questions asked in the survey were seven questions that were included in similar surveys in 1992 and 1996. The 2004 survey was mailed to all legislators on June 14 with a response deadline of July 19. A total of 102 legislators (68%) responded.

The survey responses are attached to this report as well as a comparison of responses to selected questions from the 1992, 1996, and 2004 surveys. A summary of the 2004 survey responses and some general observations follow.

## **Summary of 2004 Survey Results**

- Computer use by respondents is pervasive, with 95% indicating they use a computer in their home or office.
- Word processing, e-mail, and the Internet, each ranking above 96%, are by far the most popular applications used by respondents.
- Almost 97% of respondents have home e-mail accounts. Less than half (44%) have business e-mail accounts, while one-quarter (26%) have constituent accounts.
- During the interim, 79% of the respondents estimate that they send or receive between 10 and 20 e-mails messages per week dealing with legislative activities. During session, 64% send or receive between 50 and 100 legislative-related e-mails messages per week. Another 30% send or receive 200 or more per week.
- Approximately 95% of the respondents have used the Legislative Branch website. About 88% use it either weekly or once or twice a month during the

interim. During the session, 76% use it daily. Among users, 97% found it very easy or fairly easy to find the information that they were looking for on the website. Suggestions for improving the website included making the Senate and House membership list more prominent, listing how standing committee members voted, and providing more subjects for bill searching.

- A significant majority (87%) were willing to use different software programs than they currently use if they were provided a state computer.
- Respondents overwhelmingly indicated (91% or more) that they needed access to legislative information (bill status, bill text, fiscal notes, text of amendments). They also indicated that access to legislative information was more important than access to software tools (Internet (79%), word processing (78%), spreadsheet (35%)). Seventy percent of the respondents indicated that a standardized address for legislators would be valuable, but only 56% were interested in a state e-mail account.
- A majority of respondents want access to a computer to conduct legislative business in a host of locations, including their home or office in their district (77%), in the Capitol (assigned office space (87%), legislative chambers (64%), and shared computer pools (53%)), and in their Helena residence during the session (63%).
- Most respondents also want access to e-mail or Internet services in these same locations.
- About one-third of the respondents (39%) used the dial-up Internet service provided during the 2003 session, and 92% of those who used this service found it useful. Among the 61% who said they did not use the dial-up service, about one-half (55%) said they did not have a laptop computer.
- About two-thirds of the respondents (62%) used the shared pool of computers provided during the 2003 session. Among those using the computer pools, nearly all (98%) found this service useful, with 81% indicating that the availability of these computers was sufficient.
- About one-half of the respondents (52%) said that they would support a budget of "any reasonable cost" to provide computers, software, and computer staff support for all legislators. In contrast, 19% said that they would not support a budget for this purpose. Among respondents who favored a limit per legislator (13%), the amounts ranged from \$200 to \$1,500.
- About two-thirds of the respondents (67%) said that they would be willing to share the cost for providing Internet service to conduct personal business while in the Capitol.

- Although legislators provided several different reasons as to why proposals for providing state-owned laptops to legislators have not moved forward in the past legislative sessions, three general themes emerged:
  - ▶ it would be too costly to provide laptops to all legislators;
  - ▶ budget constraints prohibit funding of this type of proposal; and
  - ▶ the perception among both lawmakers and the general public is that there is insufficient justification for providing laptops to legislators.
- Eighty-three percent of the respondents would participate in a pre-session training program if it was kept to a maximum of 1 or 2 days.

The last question of the survey was an open-ended request for comments or recommendations to the Planning Council to consider in preparing its information technology plan. Many legislators took time to share their thoughts. The comments are recorded in the survey results. (See attached.)

### **General Observations**

1. The use of computers by legislators appears widespread. This presents both challenges and benefits for providing computing services to legislators. On the negative side, most legislators will come from a different computing environment than the one provided by the Legislative Branch and will have to adapt to a new environment. On the positive side, since legislators are computer literate and willing to adapt to change, it likely will require less training for them to adapt.
2. Legislators' primary use of computers is for Internet access, word processing, and e-mail. The Legislative Branch website is extensively used by legislators and generally appears to meet their needs. It is organized in a manner that allows them to easily find the information that they are seeking.
3. Computer services currently provided to legislators during the session seem to be meeting their needs, although some legislators have expressed a desire to access online information from locations where it currently is unavailable.
4. There does not appear to be a consensus among legislators as to whether providing state-owned laptops to all members is warranted at this time.