



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Technical Information Service

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Office of International Affairs

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Lee White, USAID, Program and Policy
Coordination, Development Information
Utilization Service

SUBJECT: Evaluation of DAN-0232-C-00-1088-00, Document
and Information Handling Facility Contract

The following are my impressions from the contract evaluation exercise which we have carried out over the past month.

Evaluation of Contractor's Performance
under present scope of work

The principal objective of the contract is "to establish and operate a comprehensive facility for AID for handling development documents and information and ... link it with other information centers in LDC institutions. The AID [DIHF] will strengthen AID's program for transferring technological information from industrialized nations to developing countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Near East [etc.]

In order to fulfill this objective, the contractor was required to accomplish thirteen tasks enumerated in the scope of work. The following tasks deserve some comment:

1. CDSI appears to have provided all capabilities called for in the introduction to the scope of work.
2. Their planning capability, as evidenced in their periodic reports and the draft Implementation Strategy for Phase III, is excellent.
3. The operations manual was not examined. I think the Evaluation Committee should witness the fact that it has been completed.
4. Operational capabilities have been provided as stipulated. It appears that there has been an about normal number of implementation problems, although the annual reports are noticeably uninformative about them.
5. We were not shown any evaluation mechanisms for testing the implementation of the operational capabilities.

6. Production of secondary journals appears to have proceeded according to instructions received from AID. That is to say, ARDA has been produced as requested, but other secondary journals have not been produced, for lack of budget.

7. The performance of "regular and special assessments of user needs and user acceptance of the information products and services..." does not appear to have been done. Moreover, products and services so far have been offered strictly as supplied, with no dynamic product development evident.

8. Capability to transfer AID databases seems to have progressed terribly slowly.

In response to the questions you raise in your original hand-out, I suggest that CDSI's track record in managing this activity has been excellent. It appears that there has been outstanding communication between AID/DIU and CDSI, that the contractor has had full guidance and has acted with adequate management information. The funding levels and priorities, given that this is a cost plus fixed fee contract, have been adequate to meet AID's vacillating needs.

Regarding the quality of the products provided, there is room for doubt regarding this. Allowing that the complaints of the reference service might have portrayed a greater problem in quality control than really exists, the February 1984 monthly report substantiates some of those complaints.

Up to mid-1983, the project could consider poor quality as part of growing pains. With the composition of the reference service and the hooking up of additional on-line users, we no longer enjoy the leeway of that excuse. And this situation will become more acute as more users demand services.

CDSI discussed the problem of the Xerox machines with the committee, and it is mentioned in the monthly report. It seems improper to slough much blame over to Xerox in this case. The frailty of the Xerox 970's is legend, and it will persist. If your system is designed for only one 970, arrangement for a back-up at some nearby location may be needed in order to provide the service promised. Trying to "get by" offering this service on a single, unreliable machine is poor management. I think a back-up arrangement is feasible, and should have been in place much earlier.

The complaints registered by the reference service regarding the accuracy of the order fulfillment and quality of the copies is something typical of this kind of service. As CDSI's public expands, they will need a group responsible for customer service. The DIHF will never achieve 100% accuracy, and customer's complaints will have to be responded to. Major user groups like the research service will need continuous attention.

Regarding the Implementation Strategy for Phase III, the document dated March 31, 1984, appears to be a typically thorough planning document. There is frequent grounding of evaluation criteria in relevance to AID program goals in the given country. This proposal seems to accommodate all instructions given by AID to date. The only issue to draw the attention of the evaluation committee, is that of time lags in Phase II implementation, which in turn will delay Phase III.

Evaluation of the contract whether still appropriate to the document and information needs of the Agency and LDC user institutions

The contract does seem to support the AID and LDC institution needs, although the wording emphasizes LDC over AID. This wording should be changed to reflect more accurately today's priorities. The A.D.Little and GAO reports seem to point unswervingly to AID's own need to maintain and utilize its institutional memory. The consensus of the group has been that if DIHF fails to serve AID/Washington, AID Missions and AID Contractors, then the contract will fail to meet its objectives.

It appears that your management of this contract reflects the above policy, and correctly so, I think. When budget squeezes have occurred the in-house constituency has been given priority over the LDC institutions. The problem this poses is that contract implementation has begun to conflict with the written mandate. That is unhealthy, in that it leaves DIU open to charges of mismanagement later on. It also leaves LDC outreach efforts like ARDA and other secondary journals inadequately funded and developed.

Whatever the reasons for originally giving such a high priority to LDC institutions, a new priority should be spelled out for this as well as other non-AID sectors of the public. The DIHF activity should then be managed in accordance with these new priorities. Either DIHF would be responsible for reaching out to these sectors or not. It is DIU's responsibility to see that someone takes care of them.

The importance of the LDC institutions will figure as part of a broader market study, reviewing the various products which have been developed, existing and potential demand, and resources required to meet these responsibilities.

Paper vs. Microfiche

The policy of basing the system on microfiche archiving of the master collection seems to have been adopted as a continuation of AID's policy since 1974. This project has not concerned itself with challenging the premise of a microfiche-based system; it has accepted the conventional wisdom that the cost savings outweigh the lack of acceptability by the public.

In the February monthly report, CDSI suggests that their operations might improve if paper copies are used as masters for photocopying, rather than microfiche. In our meeting with CDSI, Jim Booth said they are looking at the new technologies utilizing digital technology for the storing of this information, but he seemed to have no preference at this time. It may be worth noting that NTIS faces the same issues, and appears to have made no greater progress in selecting new technologies.

The benefits of microfiche are significant, in their cost of production, facility of storage, and cost of sending overseas. Note that this project already has a significant problem of documents in storage for which there is no budget to catalog and make available. Do we allow user resistance to crimp the budget even further?

The geographic bureaus have taken a bold step in microfiching their files, and this experience should be monitored closely in terms of user acceptance. Furthermore, this project should take some additional measures to experiment methods for the improvement of user acceptance: new readers, training, display. Plunking down a collection of microfiches and a reader with no further demonstration and instruction may lead to non-acceptance, which in turn may lead to dismissal of the technology.

CDSI should be checking this issue regularly. If making paper-to-paper copies is more reliable than fiche to paper, it seems a proper management decision to use this technique. The longer-term inefficiencies of paper must be considered in each step which tends to reverse the technological flow of the project. Longer term planning of the project should contain continuously revised assessments of emerging technologies.

Publications

It appears that ARDA is an effective dissemination tool, for some users more than others. There appears to be little knowledge of the user community, however, a situation which should change with the above-mentioned market study. ARDA has borne some of the brunt of budget restraints, and its effectiveness has undoubtedly suffered as a result. My opinion is that ARDA is expected to accomplish too much, for too many different types of users. There should be a minimum of three or four different outreach tools for the products and services which are available. The budget for these marketing efforts cannot be subjected to repeated attacks. Finally, the system must be structured so that when a marketing tool is successful. If it generates new demand, this should be a welcome event, providing proper incentives to continue the good job. If the DIHF is equipped so sparsely that a surge in demand provokes a crisis, success will be dreaded, and failure will become the status quo.

Abstracting

This issue carries some serious implications for the budget, and I bring to it a prejudice I should make clear from the outset: if I have to choose between a lot of information about a few references and a little information about a lot of references, I will go with the latter. This type of choice needs to be offered to the people in the different sectors who use different types of materials. Perhaps selecting an evaluation report requires more reference information than selecting a technical report. The result will be the same: more abstract, fewer reports available. Have the user help to decide, live with the consequences, and have a means for feedback.

Minicomputer system

The question of whether it is most appropriate to operate and maintain this service on a dedicated minicomputer system seems to me an issue most properly answered by CDSI's systems analysis staff. As discussed in our meetings, tight management is commendable, so long as the user is protected against "down time" when the system is being upgraded. This is especially important in a service like this where the user expects very fast response and gears his requests accordingly.

Pricing Policy

DIU will have to adopt a global policy regarding the collection of fees for services rendered by DIHF. Each decision will carry implications for projected usage by different groups. It is a subject which must be dealt with very carefully, since acceptance of the service by AID personnel may well suffer if charges are introduced carelessly.

Recommendations

1. The contract with CDSI should be renewed for a two year period as stipulated in the previous solicitation.
2. Provision for contracting procedures for the 1987-1992 must be begun no to assure negligible disruption in provision of services at that time.
3. The current scope of work should be rewritten to reflect more accurately the priorities of DIU's services, and to assure that the LDC institutions and the U.S. general public will have adequate access to DIS.
4. CDSI should improve its quality control mechanisms and evaluation mechanisms. It should be clear that CDSI is responsible for the reliable performance of the hardware and systems they have selected.
5. There should be a study of the user acceptance of microfiche in the AID geographic bureaus. This might form part of a broader, on-going assessment of technological alternatives.

6. The Phase III implementation should proceed as outlined in the March 31 document.

7. A full outreach project should be developed by DIU, separate from the DIHF contract, since it will involve all services managed by DIU. This project should draw on contracts and the RSSA in place, and those agreements might require some resources to support outreach activities. An information service without an outreach program is incomplete.

In summation, I want to offer my congratulations to you and CDSI on the very successful creation of a most difficult facility, the DIHF. Based on our experience at NTIS, I can assure you that the contractors have performed surprisingly effectively, since they were starting from almost nothing. The tasks ahead involved in bringing the user communities "on board" are equally challenging. If there is anything NTIS can do to make them a bit easier, please feel free to call on us again.



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