

Use of electronic meeting support systems

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This workshop will be held in the Decision Support Centre, where networked computers and purpose-built software are used to facilitate discussions and decision-making in a meeting environment.

- Group Systems for Windows consists of a set of computer-based tools which can be used to harness the collective thoughts and opinions of a group. It is more than just electronic brainstorming: it also allows categorising, voting and review to take place via the computer network.
- VISA (Visual Interactive Systems Analysis) is a graphical tool whereby scores and weightings derived from a Group Systems Session can be fed into Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis (MCDA) to give an overall weighting between alternatives. Real-time “what if” questions can then be asked to test group assumptions and the robustness of the result.

Malcolm Menzies and Vicky Mabin have carried out a number of priority-setting projects using these two software packages and an MCDA approach. The workshop will introduce the process that has been used, and a relevant, real life problem will be addressed. Limit of 15 participants.

Group Systems

Group Systems allows a second level of expression to take place simultaneously with any group activity - be it a presentation, discussion or planning session. While normal verbal interaction takes place, the individual can also participate silently and without disruption through the PC keyboard, which is constantly available. Advantages of the use of the computer are:

1. Input is anonymous. This leads to a more full and frank contribution;

2. Everyone is equal. No individual dominates. This is particularly helpful for meetings of young people who have newly met each other;
3. Information is not filtered. Everyone is "heard" on the basis of merit;
4. All input is captured in the words of the participant who generated it. Transcription and re-typing are avoided;
5. Participants can contribute far more ideas in the time available than would be possible in a conventional meeting;
6. Participants are able to vote on ideas; and
7. It's fun!

Participant feedback typically states that the use of Group Systems enables meetings to reach useful conclusions in about a third of the time taken by more traditional means.

Success does depend on skilful facilitation however and Victoria Link has instituted a programme of training and accreditation for facilitators.