

# Envisioning Help Resources for the Future Information Ecology: Toward an Enriched Sense of Help

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Increasingly, people turn first to the Web to seek information, perform routine transactions, shop, or find entertainment. Yet even when puzzled or overwhelmed by complex information, tasks, and tools, people continue to be exceedingly reluctant to use help resources, except as a last resort. Reasons for this include not knowing what help resources (if any) are available, expecting that help will be of poor quality or irrelevant to their needs, not wanting to interrupt their work, and viewing the use of help as an admission of failure. It is time to reconsider the role and nature of help.

The motto of the NSF-sponsored GovStat project (<http://ils.unc.edu/govstat>) is “find what you need, understand what you find”. The goal of our research is to learn more about what kinds of problems people have in finding and using the extensive statistical resources that the federal statistical agencies provide on their websites, and develop a variety of support tools to address these problems. Our work has benefited from collaboration with agency experts who are on the front lines of gathering and providing statistical information: statistical consultants, usability experts, website administrators, etc. This has added an important reality check to our proposals, as well as inspiration for new approaches.

In January 2005, GovStat sponsored a symposium on help: “Help in Public Access Websites: Understanding What you Find”. The goal of the symposium was to synthesize what we had learned about people’s needs for a variety of help resources into a new vision of what help could and should be. The pre-symposium listserv discussion and 2-day meeting brought together researchers, practitioners, and designers of information systems and tools who share an interest in helping people “find what you need, understand what you find”. One of the symposium outcomes was recognition of the need to recharacterize help as an integral part of learning (an important human trait), rather than as a crutch to use when all else has failed. In fact, the word “help” itself may be part of the problem.

This panel reunites symposium participants to share and discuss the symposium findings, and involve the audience in envisioning what help should be and formulating the research agenda to get us there. Perhaps we should reframe the issue as one of promoting self-efficacy in learning through better design, rather than providing help when a problem arises. Relevant areas of

research and practice include learning, information seeking, task structure, and institutional practices in designing and providing information of all kinds. These must be integrated with theories of designing and creating help, such as providing cues for its presence and content, foregrounding, backgrounding and layering help according to the user's current task and cognitive and emotional state, and matching presentation format to help content. In addition, we must consider practical issues such as cost, time and effort of creating help, universal accessibility requirements, and how to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of help resources. Panelists will contribute their views as researchers and practitioners in continuing to build a new vision of help and its role in the information ecology.

### **Participants**

Stephanie W. Haas, (moderator) is an Associate Professor at the School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has been an investigator on the GovStat project, and organized the help symposium.

Laurie Brown is Webmaster for the Social Security Administration's Office of Policy. She works on the front lines of finding ways to use technology to using technology to make SSA information more usable for the general public. She has been an active partner to the GovStat team.

Sheila Denn is a doctoral student at the School of Information and Library Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and member of the GovStat research team. Her interests are in using metadata and interfaces to improve statistical information usability, and help people satisfy their information needs.

David Locke of WordSmith LLC is a consultant in online information systems, including help. He is interested in the spaces between learning, training, and help, and the tools and techniques needed to meet users' needs in those areas.

Ben Shneiderman is Professor in Computer Science, Founding Director of the Human-Computer Interaction Laboratory at the University of Maryland at College Park, and an investigator on the GovStat project. In the course of his career, he has made important contributions to our thinking on interface design, usability, universal accessibility, making system designs serve people, rather than the other way around. (tentative)