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Computer Usage in Public Park and Recreation Agencies

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COMPUTER USAGE IN PUBLIC PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES

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ABSTRACT

Computer usage is one of the major trends in modern park and recreation management today.

Park and recreation professionals are using computers in the management of agency day-to-day operations. The most popular applications have been in activity registration, work tracking, facility reservations and league scheduling. The present study investigated the extent to which computers were being utilized in public park and recreation agencies in the state of New Jersey. As computer usage increases so do the applications in the field. With this new technology at our disposal we can better serve the public.

COMPUTER USAGE IN PUBLIC PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES

Computer usage is one of the major trends in modern park, recreation and leisure service management today. Practitioners and educators in these fields are seeking additional training in computer science, information services and data processing in order to expand their understanding and ability to communicate. They are beginning to use computers to identify their unique needs and find new solutions to problems (20).

Computers have been utilized very successfully in many areas in the park and recreation field. Some of these areas are in program registration (17, 19); scheduling of athletics (1, 5, 21), facilities (8, 11), and maintenance (2); inventory of trees (22) and of facilities (10); as a management tool for tasks such as utility monitoring (12) and budget preparation (4); in recreational planning through computer simulation in park and wilderness management (13), tourism (9), aerial photography (7), and visitor surveys (3); and in therapeutic recreation, in the recreation programming cycle (6) and in data retrieval.(14)

The computer is a tool that is helping the park, recreation and leisure field become a more efficiently and accurately run service.

However, many professionals are still unaware of the capabilities of the available systems and therefore feel that the computer has no application to their agency.

A mailed survey which the author conducted investigated the extent to which computers were being utilized in public park and recreation agencies. This survey was conducted in the state of New Jersey and was sent to all of the county and municipal agencies with a population of over 12,000 people. Of the 150 surveys sent, 91 (61%) of them were returned. The survey consists of questions of all agencies, whether or not they used computers in the management of their day-to-day operations. Of the 91 returns, 10% were using the computer in their agency operations, while 90% were not using the computer in their daily operations.

NON-USER RESPONSES

Of the survey questions directed to the park and recreation agencies that had not computerized their departmental operations, all 82 were asked as to the availability of a data processing center (DPC) in their city or county. It was concluded that computer services are available in many counties and municipalities. Of the 79% that responded yes, there is a DPC available, it was asked of their agency could use the data processing center. A majority of the agencies indicated that it was not available to them, and so they could not utilize their services. When asked why they could not use it, 8% did not respond. Of the 63% that did respond, almost half reported that there was no computer time available for their deparment. Over one-fourth gave other reasons, such as they have never given any thought to computerizing their operations, that they had no computer training, or they felt that the computer could only be used for payroll and budgeting, and therefore it was either handled by their local data processing department or that they had no use for it.

Of the 90% of the agencies not using the computer, almost half felt that it was too expensive. Other reasons given for not computerizing their operations were that it would probably require additional staff, it was too time-consuming to do programs, and that they didn't have the vaguest idea how a computer could help in their agency operations.

Siderelis (18) reported that a major deterrent to computer usage is a lack of understanding of the inner workings of data processing. In the present study the biggest deterrent (43%) reported by the agencies was "too expensive," followed by a lack of understanding as to the kinds of things computers can do (24%) and lack of access to data processing centers (22%). In comparing these findings to other studies (15, 16) it was found that 60.5% in 1979 and 46.9% in 1981 felt that the high cost was a major deterrent to a greater use of computers in park and recreation departments. Another deterrent cited by 57% (15) and 71.4% (16) was a lack of computer knowledge by departmental personnel.

Agencies were asked if they would be interested in sending key personnel to a computer training workshop in New Jersey. Seventy-one

percent responded yes, 18% responded no, and 11% gave no response to this question.

As far as their future plans, 30% of the municipalities and 8% of the counties responding to the survey indicated that they did have plans to computerize their departmental operations in areas such as registrations, maintenance scheduling, facility permits, financial analysis, team placement, budget, record keeping, inventory, employee evaluation, purchasing, insurance for leagues, ice arena operations, civic center scheduling, instructors' salaries and hours, mailing list, boat basin materials, traffic counts, parking revenues, nature association memberships, and park maintenance time analysis.

USER RESPONSES

Nine agencies were using computers in their departmental operations. When asked in what areas the computer was presently being used, eight agencies out of the nine were using the computer to schedule leagues. Seven out of the nine were using the computer for payroll or time card processing, mailing list, budgeting, fiscal transactions and auditing. Four agencies computerized maintenance cost reports, while three out of the nine were using the computer for program registration and procurement of supplies. In two of the agencies facility reservation, work tracking and personnel scheduling were being computerized. Recreational planning, attendance record keeping and vehicle maintenance were being computerized in one out of the nine agencies.

Personnel with the authority to use the department's computer included management, clerical staff and computer specialists. In two of the agencies a computer training program had been conducted; one agency had a computer specialist with twenty-five years of data processing experience in operations and programming on staff; in one agency, a staff member had a college degree in computers; and in five agencies, personnel had had on-the-job training with no previous experience. Almost three-quarters of the agencies expressed interest in sending key personnel to a computer training workshop in the state.

None of the agencies had to reallocate staff to other job functions as a result of computerization. This is consistent with a lack of concern for staff reduction as a deterrent to computer use.

Agencies obtained their computer programs from a variety of sources, including: developed by data processing staff specifically for their agency, purchase of standard programs and contracting with an outside agency to develop programs for their department.

Seven agencies planned further computerization in the areas of: league scheduling, race finishing, personnel assignments, park maintenance, turf chemical applications and records, program registration, insurance coverage control, facility scheduling, payroll, registration, membership and word processing.

Although only 10% of the respondents utilized a computer in their departmental operations, there exists a great deal of interest by all respondents in learning more about computers and their applications to parks and recreation management. The major deterrents were the high cost and the lack of knowledge about computer operations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An interest in a computer training workshop for park and rcreation professionals in New Jersey was expressed by 78% of the agencies that do use the computer, and 71% of the non-users; therefore, it is highly recommended that one should be offered. According to the National Recreation and Park Association National Certification Plan for recreation, park, and leisure service personnel, participants are required to earn two Continuing Education Units every two years for recertification. A computer course that offered these credits would be very beneficial.

It is further suggested that courses devoted to computers in parks, recreation and leisure services be offered to undergraduate and graduate students in colleges and universities that have this curriculum, in order to acquire hands-on experience and better prepare students to use this tool in their future employment.

Every year, the National Recreation and Park Association sponsors a national workshop on computers in recreation and parks. The meetings are not for experts only, and most of the lectures and demonstrations do not require much expertise. The proceedings contain many different examples of computer application at all levels of government. Attendance at this workshop and utilization of the proceedings should be encouraged.

It is apparent that a large majority of the non-users were not very knowledgeable about the benefits of computer use to recreation and leisure service organizations, and also that the costs are not as expensive as most people think. Publications such as "Computer Update," which provide educators and professionals in parks and recreation with the most recent information available on computer applications and current costs of various hardware and software, are also available.

Computer usage in the 1980's is undergoing a rapid change. Computer applications in recreation, parks and leisure services are increasing constantly in different areas and with much success. With this new technology at our disposal we can serve the public more efficiently and more effectively.

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