

Oftel
Telecomsadvise Web-Site
Qualitative Research Report
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1. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the research was to assess the small business TelecomsAdvice web-site in terms of the usability and usefulness of its content to ensure that, in its current format, the site is meeting the requirements of businesses.

This research examined:

- which types of business are more likely to benefit from the site, with a view to targeting these firms when publicising the site
- the specific reactions of small business advisers to the web-site
- which parts of the site are most and least useful
- suggestions for improvements to the site and for articles, information and advice that businesses require.

2. METHOD AND SAMPLE

The research comprised **individual interviews**, conducted either face-to-face or by telephone, with small business advisers and representatives from small businesses (up to 50 employees) across the UK, including Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Interviews were conducted with advisers and businesses located in both urban and rural locations. A variety of small business types were recruited to take part in the research, including manufacturing, service and retail companies.

Thirty interviews were conducted in total, comprising **twelve interviews with Business Advisers** and **eighteen interviews with Small Businesses**.

Ten of the interviews were conducted **face-to-face** (three business advisers and seven small businesses) while the remaining **twenty** interviews were conducted by **telephone**.

All respondents were asked to undertake a pre-tasking exercise, requiring a visit to the TelecomsAdvice web-site and the completion of a number of set tasks (pre-tasking requirements can be found as Appendix Two to this report). The interviews followed a pre-agreed topic guide (attached as Appendix One to this report).

The eighteen small business interviews were recruited as follows:

- **5** interviews with new small businesses (1-2 years in operation)
- **4** interviews with established (2 years +) small businesses that do not currently use the Internet
- **5** interviews with established (2 years +) small businesses that have recently started using the Internet (up to 12 months Internet experience)
- **4** interviews with established (2 years +) small businesses with longer experience of using the Internet/e-commerce (experience of one year plus)

- None of the businesses interviewed were to be specialist telecommunications or Internet service companies
- All respondents had access to the Internet – whether in the office, a business centre/library or at home
- All respondents had to be interested in developing use of the Internet in relation to their businesses, even if they had done nothing about this so far
- All respondents were to be accessing the Internet at least once a week, even if this was at home and not connected to their business
- All respondents had to agree with the attitude statement: *‘I would be interested in using a web-site for business-focussed advice regarding telecommunications or the Internet’*

Interviews were conducted with those most responsible for telecoms/Internet issues in each business.

The small business adviser interviews were distributed in order to give representation from all parts of the UK, as well as from both urban and rural locations.

3. MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

Overall, it was clear that most of the respondents found the site useful and appreciated its potential value as well as the benefits of having 'all that information in one place'.

There were no indications that any particular type of business seemed more likely to benefit from the site than others. The information offered by the web-site seemed to provide both basic and more detailed coverage regarding telecoms and the Internet, which was useful to both very small businesses and larger operations.

It is worth noting that it was very difficult to find small businesses which make no use of the Internet – even those respondents who are not currently making use of the medium recognise that this will have to do so in the near future (and have clear aspirations or intentions to do so).

Business advisers, with a few exceptions, felt that the site was very useful – both for their own use and for their more technically confident clients. They were concerned about the amount of technical material covered within the site and some were sure that this would confuse some of their clients.

The small business respondents were very mixed in terms of their familiarity with both the Internet and telecoms issues. Those with more knowledge fared well when using the web-site and were generally very pleased with the results, feeling that genuinely helpful data was obtained.

The less knowledgeable struggled to obtain useful results from the site and often gave up after a few unsatisfactory attempts. They were critical of what they saw as the unfocussed and over-complicated nature of the site and wanted a simpler method of accessing the data available.

While it seems unlikely that the web-site could replace face-to-face contacts in respect of telecoms issues, the research indicates that it can play a very effective part in providing important background material for making a product or service decision. Many of the respondents had bookmarked the site and were intending to return in the future.

In order to improve the functionality and user-friendliness of the site, the structure and presentation of the information should be re-organised. Many respondents are approaching the subjects dealt with by the web-site from a position of ignorance and need considerable hand-holding in order to derive useful results.

Broader topic headings – phrased in more straightforward consumer language – should be presented by a simplified (less text-heavy) home page. These should lead the user to ‘layers’ of information, which begin with an ‘idiot’s guide’ and progress to more complex and technically detailed material for those who require it.

Respondents were keen to see some evidence of recommended routes/options (generally failing to see how problematic that role could be for Oftel) and were emphasising the requirement for answers, rather than a statement of all the available options. It is important to ensure that the home page clearly indicates Oftel’s true role in relation to website content – currently, many respondents believed that Oftel ‘vet’ much of the content.

A solution to this may be provided by the ‘Contact Us’ function, which offers the confused user a chance to ask a specific question and receive a specific answer.

Overall, it should be emphasised that much of the feedback regarding the TelecomsAdvice web-site was very positive and virtually all the respondents supported the concept and felt that it offered real benefits for small businesses.

The suggested changes represent ‘fine-tuning’ rather than wholesale re-structuring – ultimately all the information available through the web-site was seen as valuable and most respondents simply wanted easier methods of accessing it.

4. COMMENTS ON THE SAMPLE – Business Advisers

All respondents represented organisations such as Business Link and Enterprise Centres and were involved in advising businesses varying in size from five to two hundred and fifty people.

They advise clients in relation to a number of issues, including IT, importing/exporting, human resources and finance,

“We basically advise on anything that influences and affects the setting up and running of their business” Business Adviser

Both urban and rural-based advisers took part in the research and it seemed that the rurally-based advisers encountered a number of specific business problems with clients, mainly concerning lack of available services, distance from services and travel factors. They felt that Internet-based resources were especially helpful for small rural businesses.

Most were familiar with telecoms and Internet issues, both in terms of their own work and that of their clients. Choices regarding their own office set-up were made according to factors such as reputation, service, familiarity and local presence,

“Considering we help local businesses it would be a bit strange if we didn’t use a local IT supplier” Business Adviser

There was a feeling that value for money had been achieved in respect of their own telecoms services.

The respondents were aware of a number of telecoms problems experienced by their clients, including apparent lack of choice in terms of provider and unavailability of more modern facilities and services.

There was a feeling that only a few clients actually knew much about the telecoms market and most simply accepted BT’s product without much argument.

Many small businesses were felt to be operating with essentially domestic telecoms structures,

*“We have been to appointments and the company has two phone points, both on the same number. They have no knowledge of what is available what-so-ever” **Business Adviser***

The advisers regard the Internet as a valuable tool for conducting many aspects of their work – e-mail is a typical medium for communication, while the Internet itself is regularly used to research both official and commercial data. Favourite sites included UKonline and DTIonline,

*“We access these sites a lot and create fact-sheets for clients” **Business Adviser***

Main criticisms of the web related to the volume of ‘rubbish’ available, which has to be sifted before useful material can be identified,

*“It makes it difficult for us to find relevant usable information. So imagine how difficult it must be for our clients!” **Business Adviser***

Respondents felt that their clients exhibited very mixed levels of Internet awareness – while some were familiar with the medium and its applications for their own businesses, others had no knowledge at all.

Overall, there was a feeling that many small businesses do not know enough about the Internet to maximise the potential advantages on offer. The respondents also believed that ‘*They don’t know, what they don’t know...*’ – indicating that small businesses without basic Internet or telecoms knowledge would have no chance of increasing their understanding without very specific assistance.

Generally, the business advisers were very conscious of small business issues regarding telecoms and the Internet - and these were felt to be important,

*“There is no doubt that the internet plays a part in most businesses now, so our role in advising about such issues is increasing” **Business Adviser***

5. COMMENTS ON THE SAMPLE – Small Businesses

The businesses which took part in the research were varied in terms of size, location and nature of business. Manufacturing, service and retail were all represented and the scope of business ranged from home-based operations through to multi-site companies.

A majority had sought advice when starting their businesses – from a variety of sources which included: Business-Link, Enterprise Centres, local chamber of commerce, the Internet and books. Some had previous business experience, which they felt was sufficient to enable them to ‘take the first few steps’.

Most respondents were using BT as their telecoms provider and a majority were happy with the service provided. Some had tried other options – cable and CPS – but eventually returned to BT.

There were many complaints about BT, especially in relation to the service available in rural areas (no ADSL was a common complaint), and some felt that BT were ‘dragging their heels’ generally in relation to rolling out new services and technology across the UK. Nonetheless, few had any specific problems which seriously affected their ability to do business.

Most of the respondents were using the Internet at some level – whether for simple research and e-mail or more obviously e-commerce-type activity,

“The Internet? Oh, just for e-mail.” SME

“We have our own web site. We have to compete with the big boys so its an extra tool.” SME

“For the trucks, there are sites we are registered to that we can go into and find loads for our vehicles.” SME

Many were waiting eagerly for either ADSL or BT’s Internet Anytime service, especially since independent ISPs seemed to provide a highly variable service. There were many concerns regarding frequent ‘down-time’ by their chosen provider, lack of 24-hour service and even difficulties getting initially connected.

Smaller businesses were evidently keen to make better and more extensive use of the Internet, but were handicapped by a lack of knowledge of what might be possible – again, *‘if you don’t know, you don’t know’* and many respondents were waiting for someone to tell them about the potential of the medium.

Overall, few of the businesses taking part in research were specifically dissatisfied with either the telecoms or Internet aspects of their operations, although this attitude seemed to be driven by a strong desire to *‘get on with the real business’* and not be distracted by peripheral matters.

“I really don’t have a lot of time or inclination to spend hours on my computer, reading lots of irrelevant stuff – I would make a very quick decision about whether this was relevant to me and then stay or go....it is costing me money after all and you can get useless advice anywhere...”

6. INITIAL REACTIONS TO THE TELECOMSADVICE WEBSITE

6.1 Overall

General reactions to the web-site were positive from most businesses and advisers. There was support for an information source regarding telecoms and the Internet. There was not felt to be any current alternative source for this type of information,

“It is especially good that all the information is in one place, one site” SME

“Its very informative. I already discovered things I wasn’t aware of, like you can stop unsolicited calls and faxes.” SME

It is important to indicate that none of the respondents were actually in serious difficulty with regard to either telecoms or Internet issues. Thus, most approached the site from the perspective of a broadly satisfied consumer – although all would like to benefit from better practices or savings if these were available.

Equally, many of the respondents were not sure of exactly what they wanted to achieve in relation to either telecoms or the Internet. They were often seeking advice and recommendation as much as information and some of the web-site material seemed overly objective or neutral, seemingly shy of indicating the best available options,

“There’s no doubt that there is a huge amount of information available, but if you don’t know what you don’t know then you don’t know what you are looking for” Business Adviser

Respondents pointed out that they were very conscious of the time spent on-line and that, if searches took a long time, they became very aware of the costs involved. This factor may have accounted for some of the failed interactions with the site,

“I did spend about 30 to 35 minutes on the site, couldn’t find what I wanted so I left” SME

“It’s [the web site] all right. For us to go through a web site, well, we don’t have the time. It looked to me like I could spend two hours looking at that site.” SME

Advisers were naturally keen that the site reflected the quality and nature of advice being offered by themselves. Some were worried that their clients might get bogged down in technical details and become even more confused. In general, however, they approved of the site content, although some did feel that the amount of jargon and technical terminology would not be helpful,

*“It does begin with technical terms on the first page, but if you don’t know what these mean you are starting from a place too advanced to begin with” **Business Adviser***

Despite these reservations, most respondents were pleased with the web-site offering and most adverse comment related to actual delivery of information.

6.2 Perceived Utility/Actionability of the Site

Most of the respondents found some elements of value for their businesses and advisers uncovered parts of the site which seemed to have obvious utility for their clients.

Whether the small businesses were able to clearly answer all their key questions is more debatable – some did find material which they apparently intended to action immediately and others found material which, although unexpected, proved to be of real worth.

*“The office system we’re not going to change every five minutes, but there’s mobile information on there which I know is a changing market. And then if a problem does come up, at least I know where to go.” **SME***

Others, however, seemed to make initial forays into the site and then give up, with some claiming that material was not accessible or present when, in fact, it was. In a number of cases, the respondent was apparently discouraged by overly technical material or a lack of obviously consumer-friendly presentation,

*“I was expecting to be able to type in ‘cheaper phone calls’ and it would take me there”. **SME***

Those who were only marginally familiar with the Internet were much more likely to give up and dismiss the site and its contents. The attention span and inclination to persevere of this sample segment was an important factor – some respondents were simply bored or frustrated very quickly.

Those with more awareness of the Internet were more likely to make effective use of the site and to achieve useful results. They generally expressed real enthusiasm for both the scope and depth of material available, believing that much of the information could be immediately of use to their businesses.

Advisers tended to feel that much valuable information was accessible via the site, but that many clients would need careful shepherding through the medium in order to achieve success. Some felt it would better if they acted as intermediary, using the web-site as a source for their own use.

Overall, however, it seemed that many respondents were impressed by the genuinely actionable material on offer and were taking steps to make best use of this.

6.3 Likelihood of Re-Visiting the Site

Those respondents who found the site useful and made effective use of the information available, felt that they were very likely to return to the site. Some, indeed, had already book-marked the site for future use. They saw it as a valuable method of keeping abreast of developments in the world of telecoms and the Internet. Overall, a majority of small business respondents felt that they would return to the site.

“There were things I hadn’t come across before, and I’m sure if I needed more information the site would come up with additional details.” SME

“I’ve already done [book-marked] it.” SME

The less Internet-friendly respondents were not interested in visiting the site again – they were unhappy with the technical terminology used and felt frustrated at their inability to navigate effectively.

Most of the business advisers felt that they would make future use of the site – recommending the site to those clients who were more technically-minded, while passing on information from the site to others,

“I would definitely print sections off for clients, in fact I already have, and also direct them to the site to have read and come back for discussions and questions” Business Adviser

Overall, reactions to the issue of future use of the site were positive.

6.4 Perceived Independence of the Site

All the respondents spotted the sponsors logos on the home page. While some were quietly cynical about the likelihood of commercial providers offering objective advice, there was an erroneous perception that Oftel were actually administering the site and ensuring independence,

“You’d expect that with Oftel involved the information would have to be independent” SME

Given this perception and the implications for material presented on the site, it seems important that the true role of Oftel in relation to the website is clearly stated.

Some respondents commented on the lack of advertising banners throughout the site and found this admirable – a clear indication that commercial interests were not in charge.

“Its always at the back of your mind that it could be from a provider, but once you went into a few different pages you could see that that wasn’t the case.” SME

“It doesn’t push one product more than another.” Business Adviser

The tone of the text strongly indicated that the material was consumer-focussed and objective – although some respondents were genuinely surprised that they were moved onto other operator’s sites for certain topics. This raised some questions:

‘How can Oftel make sure that this lot are sticking to the script – after all, they’ve provided their site to make themselves money...’ SME

Again, Oftel’s relationship with the website needs to be clarified in order to avoid confusion.

These concerns apart, a majority of the sample were very happy that the site offered truly honest and independent advice. One casualty of independence, however, was felt to be recommendation – some respondents complained that the site offered all the information, but made no recommendations about what options might be best for which types of company.

6.5 Comparison with Face-to-Face Advice

The problems with a perceived lack of true *advice* were reflected in attitudes towards the issue of face-to-face communication. Many of the respondents would still want to talk to someone before making a final decision regarding either telecoms or the Internet – they felt that they had questions which could not be answered by the site,

“The site is good for the information provided, but I’d still check with my adviser, he knows me and my business” SME

“It would still be advisable [to see some one]. At the moment of signing the contract, I would want to see some one.” SME

A number of respondents had sent e-mail questions to the site – reflecting the need for further communication. Only those respondents who were very confident about telecoms or the Internet were not interested in a later stage of face-to-face advice.

Overall, it was clear that the site offers a lot of information, but many respondents did not see this as advice – the crucial question was always ‘will it suit me?’.

Most felt that it would be a very useful support mechanism for business advisers.

7. COMPLETING THE REQUIRED INFORMATION-GATHERING TASKS

7.1 Overall

Most of the respondents achieved at least a partly successful search of the web-site. All seemed to find basic information about the topic being sought – but while some progressed to very practical and useful data, others gave up and were negative about the process.

The respondents who had most success were those who thoroughly familiarised themselves with the structure of the web-site. A vital feature was the site map, which seemed the most important access tool for effective use of the data available. Those who had less success seemed to use the site in a random and speculative fashion – which meant that most missed important articles or features and often ended up in what were seen as information ‘cul-de-sacs’.

Some of the less successful group were not especially familiar with web-sites and the Internet in general (nor particularly technically-minded). They sometimes missed key headings or terms and were unsure how to proceed once an initial platform had been reached.

In general, however, most of the information-gathering exercises produced some useful results and many of the respondents found much more data than had been expected.

7.2 Tasks: Solving the biggest problem /concern with Telecoms at the moment

The most typical major problems concerned two issues:

- Finding a way to make cheaper phone calls
- Deciding whether to use higher speed connections – ISDN, ADSL

The first issue frustrated a number of respondents – there seemed to be no specific heading regarding costs. A few respondents used the toolkit and this led them to the required information, which was seen as very useful. Others, however, spent a long time searching for obvious routes to costs issues but were unable to find these,

*“I looked for cheaper phone calls, couldn’t find it in 20 minutes, so I left the site”. **Business Adviser***

The more success respondents found their way to sites such as *phonebills.org.uk* and obtained very useful information regarding their current arrangements. Another found a more economical carrier for their 0800 number,

*“I did check the best 0800 number provider, because we have one, and it was good to see we had the right company. It was a different story with our phone line provider” **SME***

*“At *phonebills.org.uk* it didn’t cover business tariff. But I put my home address in and got cheaper calls there!” **SME***

It was clear that extremely useful information was available – but some respondents simply could not find this. Those that persevered almost always found information which could save their business money and offer a more appropriate service.

Examining the issue of higher speed connections was apparently more straightforward in relation to actually finding the information. Virtually all respondents found some material regarding this matter, but some were obviously confused by the technical language involved.(POTS, ISDN (BRI) PBX). This latter group felt that more questions were raised than answered.

While all the required material was certainly available on the web-site, respondents with limited existing technical needed more directive advice – they were not in a position to make judgements regarding the most appropriate technology for their needs,

*“I don’t really understand all the terms. I know they are explained but I wouldn’t know whether my business would benefit from which if any”. **SME***

'I've looked at cable modems, ADSL and ISDN and they all have something to offer....advantage and disadvantages for a business like ours, but I need someone to say to me 'Go for that one'I wouldn't feel happy to make the final decision based on what I've seen...' SME

7.3 Tasks: Finding out how to make cheaper phone calls

See comments above

7.4 Tasks: Finding out how to go about changing telecoms supplier

Few respondents were very interested in this option – some thought changing supplier was not possible, so the exercise was seen as purely theoretical. The concept of carrier pre-selection (CPS) was very new and unusual to many respondents and some found this very exciting.

Otherwise it could be informative to find out that BT was not offering the best package for your business *'But what alternatives do I really have?'*. Equally, the motivations to switch were quite limited in many cases.

7.5 Tasks: Finding out how to measure a telecoms company's reliability

Again, there was limited interest in this topic – few respondents felt that there were major issues regarding reliability, with complaints mainly focussing on cable providers. BT was seen as unexciting but broadly very reliable.

Respondents were surprised that measures of Telco's reliability were produced or available for public consumption. Few were sure how they would use these.

7.6 Tasks: Finding out whether your business should go online

This was a key interest for virtually all respondents – even those with an existing Internet presence. This latter group were concerned about the real utility of their current operations: *'Am I doing it right?'*. Respondents who were not yet using the Internet were nevertheless concerned that they could be left behind and that there might be basic improvements which should be immediately set in motion.

There was felt to be a lot of information available on the site, but many respondents felt it needed co-ordinating into a logical 'whole'. Constantly referring back and forth between different pages and articles was felt to be too difficult, as was printing out large amounts of information.

Those respondents without a current Internet presence were keen to see a real beginners guide – covering all the necessary background and purchasing information. They mostly wanted to be 'walked through' the entire set-up process. Equally, some felt that it would be good to read some 'true-life' stories of company's experiences with the Internet and the mistakes that had been made.

“That would give you some of the benefits of talking to another person about the Internet – reading about another person's experiences might help you to avoid some of the pitfalls...” SME

The competent and experienced Internet users were interested in more detailed 'advanced users' information, relating to improving connection methods and increasing the utility of their web-sites. Consequently, much of the current information was seen as 'old hat' and irrelevant,

“You have to have sections for beginners and advanced users....if I don't see obviously more advanced information, then I will assume that it's all for the first-timer and go somewhere else...you need to let people find their own place in this site, otherwise they'll switch off....you can't spend hours reading this stuff on-line” SME

Respondents who were more familiar with the Internet felt that there was some irony in the information presented by the 'DIY Web-site Design', which they saw as contradicting the approach taken by TelecomsAdvice,

“Tell people what is available on your site....don't cram too much onto the home page....I have to say that I laughed at that bit, since this web-site seems to violate all those rules....I wonder if Oftel read that article before they constructed the site...” Business Adviser

Overall, although much useful information was available on the web-site, it seemed that the organisation of that information was not as effective as it could be. Many of the respondents seemed unable to 'pull together' the diverse data elements available and were really seeking a step-by-step 'idiot's guide' to setting-up on the Internet. More sophisticated users wanted their information clearly segmented and identified – in order to avoid spending time reading what they already know.

7.7 Tasks: Finding out how to go about getting an office telephone system

There was feeling that buying a telephone system was a real minefield, with the possibility of wasting thousands of pounds on a product that quickly became obsolete or which was very difficult to use,

“At the beginning, I didn’t understand the questions I was meant to be asking. That’s the key to that one, and this would have told me the questions to ask. I guess I was lucky that we’ve ended up with something that’s ok, but at the time I didn’t know whether it was or not.” SME

For some respondents, this task showed the web-site at both its most useful and its most frustrating. Many found the section and feature article regarding telephone systems and recognised that these contained a lot of useful information. The key information, however, was ‘which is best?’ Few believed that this question could not be answered and were seeking a Which?-style assessment of the common products available.

Again, many were frustrated that, although the article and feature offered the relevant technical terminology and key purchase variables, there was no attempt to take the discussion a stage further.

“What’s wanted is a few articles written by small businesses that have bought systems and which tells us about the problems that they encountered and how they got it right....all that information on the site would give me the right words to use, but I know that I would still be at the mercy of a salesman...” SME

“It’s good and useful, but I would still have to spend a lot of time with someone when it came to actually buying a system – it’s food for thought, that’s all....” Business Adviser

8. EVALUATING THE WEBSITE

8.1 The Site Itself – Entry Points

The most crucial aspect of the web-site seems to be the home page. Generally, reactions to the home page were quite negative, with most criticism focussing on the following points:

- The amount of material on the home page – many felt that it was visually cluttered and confusing

“If you’re new to it [the site] there’s an awful lot to take in.”

- The amount of text which forms the home page – many respondents wanted simpler, visual cues for next steps
- The diversity of topics covered on the home page – this baffled some respondents who were very unsure where to start
- The small section dedicated to search facilities
- The very low-key index which includes the site map and guide

There were some positive comments regarding the ease and speed of downloading.

“The pages loaded up very quickly relative to a lot of sites. I guess that’s because you haven’t got lots and lots of images.” SME

“Some web sites are throwing things at you all the time. This one doesn’t do anything unless you ask it to.” Business Adviser

A few respondents were pleased that the site was not too ‘flashy’ and complicated – it looks serious (but actually too serious for many of the less technically-sophisticated respondents).

Overall, it was clear that the home page did not provide a particularly user-friendly access point to the web-site. A significant number of respondents were very unclear about how to proceed – and simply ‘jumped into’ the site, with often limited success.

Respondents wanted a more simple, visually-based, home page which focussed initially on major topics such as:

- Choosing telecoms equipment
- Choosing the most suitable telephone connection
- Getting the best deal on phone calls
- Getting the right telecoms provider for your business
- Explaining telecoms jargon
- Getting connected to the Internet
- Getting the best Internet deals
- Setting up a web-site
- Doing business on the Internet

Currently, the home page is too busy and too complicated – respondents wanted a more algorithmic/hierarchical structure which would allow them to focus their areas of interest and eventually arrive at clear solutions,

“It needs to flow like a flow chart, to guide you through to a final destination and answer” SME

The presence of the sponsors logos was noted and this was useful in terms of knowing who was involved – but it has no real utility in the context of the purpose of the web-site. Respondents felt that these logos could appear at the bottom of the page.

Some of the more internet-familiar respondents were critical of the web-site for appearing drab and rather dull – while they approved of the fast loading, they felt that so much text would not encourage the viewer to experiment with the site.

After browsing the site, many respondents felt that the site map would provide a much more useful starting point for the ordinary user. It seemed clearer and more focussed on subject areas – although there were some negative comments regarding the subject headings (‘Doing Business On-

Line' seems unconnected with many of the following subjects – one of which, confusingly, is 'using the telephone to do business on-line').

'Getting connected' contains terms like 'indirect access telecoms provider', which was unfamiliar to many, "I saw that and had no idea what it was supposed to be about". These headings need to be more straightforward and focussed on obvious and recognisable topic areas.

8.2 The Site Itself – General Navigation

The site responds very quickly and few had any problems moving around,

"Once you were logged on it was easy to get to what you wanted to know. I soon got through the pages to the point where it told me, "these are the things you should be thinking about" SME

When moving via links to other sites, however, there were real complaints about getting back to the home page or main site (there seemed to be little use of the 'screen within a screen' mechanism),

"That really annoyed me. Every time I went to another site I couldn't get back and had to load up Outlook Express again" SME

This was felt to be a major problem, especially if working with a relatively slow connection, and many respondents had given up and logged off.

Many respondents 'followed a trail' through the site and associated links until they were bored – at which point they tended to log off. Problems with getting back to the main site and frustration with an apparent lack of really decisive advice, generated much of the negative comment.

Overall, the feel of the site is too heavily text-based and requires too much discriminatory attention:

'I had to think all the time....where do I go next???' Business Adviser

8.3 The Site Itself – Content, Language, Jargon

The business advisers were generally quite happy with the language content of the site, but felt that many of their clients would struggle with the levels of detail involved – and this proved to be true. Respondents were baffled by the abbreviations and acronyms used in describing many of the product options available. For some, this confirmed the dangerous nature of the territory and created a desire to talk about the topics ‘with a real person’.

In many instances, however, the presentation of material was praised – the page on viruses was felt to be very sensible and helpful – but there were concerns about the amount of material available on particular topics.

For example, the subject of choosing a suitable fast access phone connection is covered by a number of pages, dealing with ISDN, ADSL, leased lines and cable modems. While there may be excellent technical reasons why these subjects should be examined separately, many of the respondents saw this as a single decision area and wanted a comprehensive overview,

“It’s almost as if you have to start at a level earlier, not with the terms straight away. More a ‘You want to know how to get faster internet provision?’” SME

8.4 The Site Itself – Links and Further Information

The links on offer were viewed very positively – although some respondents were surprised when they found themselves on ‘someone else’s’ web-site and wondered whether the information was still monitored by Oftel. In general, however, most found it reasonable to use external sources for very helpful material, provided that the Oftel ‘guarantee of independence’ remained in force. Again, there is a need to clearly define Oftel’s role in relation to the site.

“There’s lots of information under one roof. Before I was checking one by one, using the Internet, from one supplier to another comparing all the packages and prices. Here you can do everything at the same time – the site does the work for you.” SME

Many of the respondents used the ‘Contact Us’ option, which addressed their concerns regarding speaking to a ‘person’ and being able to ask a specific question related to their own business structure. Some noted that they had not received a reply after a number of days.

8.5 The Site Itself – Suggestions for Improvements

Suggested improvements were very clear:

- **Improve the home page** – reduce the amount of text, insert some broad categories as a ‘start point’, make these easily accessible by pressing a ‘button’
- As a short-term measure – **tighten up the site map** (clearer section headings) and make this starting point (even if this means having a button on the home page which says ‘New Users Start Here’ and links to the site map)
- In terms of content – be more **directive** in terms of the options available; many of the respondents are starting from a position of ‘knowing nothing’ and require hand-holding all the way. They want to be told what is right for them
- **Simplify and clarify the information available** – order the topics under very clear, broad headings and then address the various issues in a tiered manner, starting with an ‘idiot’s overview’ and progressing to more technically complex levels. Technical language and jargon should be confined to these ‘deeper’ levels
- Make a **greater feature of the ‘Contact Us’ option**, which seems to be the preferred option for many of the less technically advanced respondents
- Make it easier to **return to the main site or home page** when pursuing links

APPENDIX ONE
Interview Topic Guide

- **Background Information:**

- Company details – nature of business etc.
- Where did they seek help in relation to setting up their business? Why did they choose that source? What was their experience? What sources of business information were they aware of in general?
- Role of telephony in their business – overview of products chosen, overview of service provider choice, payment package, satisfaction with service/product/VFM
- Where did they get advice regarding telecoms products and service? Why did they choose that source? What was their experience?
- What are currently their biggest problems with telecoms products or services? (*respondents will be asked to check for possible solutions when making unprompted use of the site*)
- (*If appropriate*) Internet details – ISP, connection type, payment package
- Role of the Internet in their business – what typically used for, importance to business
- Experience of the Internet – satisfaction, any problems encountered, match of expectations to reality
- What are currently their biggest problems with Internet products or services? (*respondents will be asked to check for possible solutions when making unprompted use of the site*)

- **Unprompted use of the web-site:**

- What did you do while visiting the web-site?
- What sections of the site did you visit? Why?
- What did you think of the site overall? Why do you say that?
- Does it seem relevant/useful? Why/why not?
- Does it seem new/different? Why/why not? Was the material new to you or did you already know it?
- Who is the sponsor of the site/who runs it? Who is providing the advice on offer? Where does the information come from? How do you feel about that?
- What did think of the look/presentation of the site – what did you like/dislike?
- How easy was the site to navigate? What specific aspects made it easy/difficult?

- Was it easy to see the contents of the site – did you feel that you knew what information was available on the site?
- How did you feel about the language used in the site – was it accessible/comprehensible? Was there too much jargon or too many technical terms? If so, give examples
- Generally, what did you think of the sections of the site which you visited?
- Which did you find useful and why?
- Which did you not find useful and why?
- Which screens were most useful and why?
- How generally useful do you feel the information for business users? Why do you say that?
- **How specifically useful was the information for your own business? Why do you say that?**
- **Would you add any information that is not currently available on the site? Why?**
- Did you follow any of the links available from the site? If so, what were these and why did you choose them? Are the links generally important/useful?
- Can you think of any other improvements to the web-site, which would increase relevance and utility for yourself?
- How do you feel about the independence of the advice on offer – do you trust this to be impartial? Why/why not?
- **Would you actually use the advice given for your own business? Why/why not?**
- **Would you come back to this web-site again (would you bookmark the site)? Why/why not?**
- **How does the site compare with face-to-face advice? Which do you personally prefer and why?**
- **Thinking back to your biggest Telecoms problems – could you find any useful/helpful advice through the site? What was this and would you actually action the advice?**
- **(If appropriate) Thinking back to your biggest Internet problems – could you find any useful/helpful advice through the site? What was this and would you actually action the advice?**
- Any other comments?

- **Prompted Exercise:**

- How easy was it to accomplish the task?
- What factors made it easier?
- What factors made it more difficult?
- Did you find useful/helpful answers to the question which was posed?

- What did you find out? Was this sufficient?
- How did you feel about the level of detail available in relation to the topic?
- How actionable was the information?
- Did you believe the advice available? Why/why not?
- Did it seem independent? Why/why not?
- Was there clear guidance regarding further sources of information?
- Would you use these? Why/why not?

- **Summing-up:**

- Overall, did the site provide an adequate, business-focussed response to the task? Why/why not?
- Would you trust the information found on the site? Why/why not?
- What could be improved in order to make the information more suitable/useful?
- In summary, recap your responses to the web-site and any suggestions for changes/improvements
- Would you like to stay in contact following this research? (*outline options for registering on the web-site or becoming an Oftel case-study*)

Thank you and close

APPENDIX TWO - Respondent Pre-Tasking

All respondents must complete two short exercises before being interviewed.

Respondents must visit the web-site (telecomsadvice.org.uk) and undertake the following exercises:

EXERCISE 1

→ What is the biggest problem / concern you have with Telecoms at the moment? Try visiting the site to see if it helps you with those concerns.

EXERCISE 2 – CHOOSE **ONE** OF THE FOLLOWING TASKS:

→ Find out how to make cheaper phone calls.

→ Find out how to go about changing your telecoms supplier.

→ Find out how you would measure a telecoms company's reliability.

→ Find out whether your business should go online.

→ Find out how you would go about getting an office telephone system for your company.