

Legislators enter computer age

BY KEON S. CHI

State lawmakers are entering the Internet age in droves, according to a recent survey on the use of computers by state legislators conducted by The Council of State Governments.

While computer use is not widespread, all legislators in 28 states had personal computers on their chamber desks during the 2000 sessions. The South led the charge with 13 Southern states having personal computers on all legislators' chamber desks.

Legislators' computer use while in session varies from state to state and chamber to chamber, CSG found. Most Washington House members use laptops on the floor to track proceedings, while some senators use them for e-mail. Every Missouri House member has a laptop in the chamber to access laws, introduce bills or amendments, and receive information on open roll-call votes.

Some legislative chambers, such as the Ohio House, have banned computer use by legislators on the floor. Other states, such as Florida, restrict the use of Internet e-mail during proceedings.

Legislators in most states use computers in their capitol or district offices and at home. The CSG survey revealed positive and negative comments on the use of computers by state legislators for legislative work and constituent services. CSG surveyed members of the National Association of Legislative Technology Information in the 50 states and directors of legislative service agencies in selected states. Respondents saw computers in legislatures as a boon for the following reasons:

- Laptops allow legislators to draft bills or propose amendments at any time.
- Computers allow legislators and others to track a bill's status without staff assistance.
- Fewer copies of bills need to be made when they are available online.
- The Internet gives legislators access to timely information.
- Legislators' Web pages provide public information and constituent services.
- Internet access opens the legislative process to the public. The public gains access to the same legislative information as legislators and lobbyists have through the Internet. Legislative information that is available on the Internet promotes public awareness of and participation

in the legislative process.

- Computer and Internet use by legislators can foster a more positive public perception of the legislature.

Respondents also mentioned some negative aspects:

- The use of computers and the Internet tends to reduce face-to-face interactions.



A CSG survey shows legislators and the public expect to reap benefits from increased use of the Internet and computers, but expect some pitfalls as well.

- Lobbyists can e-mail their comments on floor debates and votes to online legislators, potentially increasing their influence.

- Lawmakers using computers on the floor may be less attentive and may not participate fully in floor debates, hurting the quality of deliberations.

- Legislators might have trouble dealing with a heavy volume of e-mail messages.

- The use of e-mail messages might disrupt legislative sessions.

- E-mail messages might be less civil and lack nuances found in handwritten notes.

- Not all legislative information available online is accurate.

- Too much reliance on the Internet poses risks such as misuse, privacy violations, security breaches, power outages or system failures.

CSG's survey found that every state anticipates increased use of computers and the Internet by state legislators. Major contrib-

uting factors to this trend include legislative leaders' desire to meet the challenges of a new information age, availability of information from online legislative-information systems, and an increased demand for electronic communication among lawmakers, their staffs and the public.

On future use of computers by legislators, Iowa's Sandy Scharf, director of the legislative technology office, said, "There will be a huge increase in usage. As current members become more computer literate and as new members come to the Legislature with computer skills, I see usage and demand for specific programming growing exponentially."

Don Flowers, director of the Mississippi legislative information technology office, said, "My crystal ball shows that the usage by members will increase over the next couple of years. It will then level out and stay fairly constant for five or more years."

See the forthcoming report, "Technology in State Legislatures: The Impact of Computer Use by State Legislators," The Council of State Governments. To order, call (800) 800-1910.

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