

USING COMPUTER-ASSISTED PROCESS FACILITATION TECHNIQUES IN GOVERNMENT SPONSORED PUBLIC MEETINGS AND WORKING SESSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a process facilitation technique using computer hardware and software that assists its users in group decision-making, consensus building, surveying and polling, and strategic planning. The process and equipment has been successfully used by the Department of Energy and Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Inc., Environmental Restoration and Waste Management Community Relations program. The technology is used to solicit and encourage qualitative and documented public feedback in government mandated or sponsored public meetings in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

BACKGROUND OF ISSUE UNDER PUBLIC DISCUSSION

Contaminants associated with lithium processing at the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Y-12 Plant in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, were released into East Fork Poplar Creek (EFPC). This creek runs through the Y-12 Plant site and the city of Oak Ridge (Population 37,000) and is bordered by public and private land. Significant quantities of mercury and other trace metals, organics and radionuclides have been found in the creek. In 1982, data indicated that the Y-12 Plant, a nuclear weapons component plant, could not account for 2.4 million pounds of mercury. The mercury had been released into the environment since 1953. Hundreds of pounds of mercury may be in sumps, sewers and shale cavities beneath the plant. The lithium process that used mercury in its production was discontinued in 1963, yet mercury continues to enter the creek, primarily through storm sewers from the plant and floodplain erosion.

The headwaters of the creek are contained in 54- to 72-inch underground collection pipes that extend from the west end to the center of the plant, where the above-ground part of the creek begins. Over the years, the creek flowed into New Hope Pond, an equalization basin constructed by the Y-12 Plant in 1963. The creek served as the drainage outlet for the pond until November 8, 1988, when the water was diverted from the pond into a new downstream basin, known as Lake Reality. The creek exits the Y-12 property and enters the city of Oak Ridge, where it flows north and then west. It continues to flow westward through residential and underdeveloped parts of Roane County, Tennessee, and reenters the DOE Oak Ridge Reservation before it meets Poplar Creek in the area near the DOE K-25 Site, formerly a gaseous diffusion plant.

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Superfund or CERCLA) National Priorities List. Under CERCLA, the planning actions typically follow the Remedial Investigation/Feasibility Study/Remedial Design/Remedial Action Process.

HISTORY OF THE EFPC WORKING GROUP

The Department of Energy and its contractor, Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Inc., (Energy Systems) found that when they announced a remediation decision on a waste disposal area unrelated to the East Fork Poplar Creek project and attempted to explain the decision to the public, the public ostensibly replied: No! Listen to us. You need to have a better feel and understanding of what we are willing to accept in remediation and cleanup work, and you need to have information on the frontend and throughout the decision-making process.

"...the public wanted front-end input...a working group seemed an appropriate and desirable course of action to meet their request..." -Gail Rymer, ERWM Community Relations.

As the result of this strong public response, it was decided that on the East Fork Poplar Creek project, the Department of Energy and Energy Systems would secure front-end public input and would establish and maintain an ongoing dialogue. Therefore, a citizens' working group was established for the EFPC project.

The idea for the working group originated with Gail Rymer, Manager of Community Relations for Energy Systems Environmental Restoration and Waste Management (ERWM) program and Sandy Perkins, Manager of DOE's Community Relations program.

The announcement to offer the public this opportunity was made at the May 1993 EFPC meeting where the findings from the remedial investigation were made public. Members of the public were encouraged to sign up to participate. Thirty-five people did so. The average attendance at a working group session has been between 15-25 people.

PURPOSE OF THE EFPC WORKING GROUP

The *working group* was established to help educate the public about the various processes, laws, and criteria that help managers make decisions about remediation work. Further, it was designed to open an ongoing dialogue with the public. Such an approach allows interested and concerned citizens an opportunity to learn about the processes and then provide front-end advice, counsel, and opinions on the various aspects of the project to government managers. The Department of Energy and Energy Systems recognized from the outset that the group was not representative of the stakeholders at large. However, the working group does provide a forum for a cross-section of genuinely interested and involved citizenry and an opportunity to pilot an innovative concept in securing public involvement and feedback.

WHY WOULD YOU USE A COMPUTER-ASSISTED PROCESS FACILITATION SYSTEM WITH THE PUBLIC?

Citizen participation, which is now mandated by various laws and regulations, is a governmental trend that will continue into the foreseeable future. These types of constituent interactions are essential to developing and maintaining credibility with the tax-paying publics, who are becoming more and more critical of government officials and the decisions they are making that affect the public's health, safety, welfare, and pocketbooks. Because of this climate, public information sessions will require innovative and creative facilitation techniques to solicit qualitative, quantifiable and meaningful information that government managers can use to make and justify their decisions.

As government agencies involve their constituents in these various decision making processes the need for documented quantifiable and qualitative data grows.

The Wilson Learning Corporation's *Innovator*^{*}, a group decision-making and strategic planning tool and process, had been used by the principal author of this paper with the Tennessee Valley Authority, the nation's largest public utility, and Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Inc., a contractor to DOE, for strategic planning.

The author invited the deputy-to-the-manager of the Energy Systems Community Relations program to attend a session at the Saturn Automotive Plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee, in July 1993 to observe the facilitation process, review the equipment, and to consider how the technology could be adapted for use by the community relations organization for application in public meetings.

HOW WAS THE TECHNOLOGY USED WITH THE WORKING GROUP?

Following the introduction and training in this session, Kay Armstrong, the deputy manager for Energy Systems Community Relations suggested to Karen Bowdle, the EFPC working group project manager, that the technology could be successfully used with the working group to:

- *encourage* members of the group to get more involved in providing qualitative information;

- *facilitate* more dialogue from members of the group who might be hesitant to voice their opinions;
- *poll* the group members on various topics including the importance and value that they held for various aspects of the decision-making process;
- *survey* group members to determine which alternatives were acceptable to them;
- and *assist* group members in *setting priorities* for the management team to consider in making decisions

The technology was demonstrated to DOE, Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), and Radian managers working on the EFPC feasibility study in August 1993. Concurrence to use the technology resulted. The managers acknowledged the benefits of using the technology to help them better understand what the public was thinking and feeling about the work underway on the EFPC project.

In September 1993, a demonstration of the technology was given to the working group with 16 people in attendance. Again, the response to the demonstration was very favorable with the participants in the working group agreeing the technology should be employed to help facilitate a better understanding of their positions on various aspects of the project. The results of these facilitated sessions are available by contacting the author.

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WHAT ARE THE FUTURE USES OF THE TECHNOLOGY WITH THE WORKING GROUP?

The technology's surveying and polling techniques will be used in future meetings to solicit additional feedback and information on various aspects of the project. It seems possible that the working group may proceed through a process-facilitated workshop to develop their own remediation alternative in which the technology would play a critical role in the facilitation process.

WHAT MAKES THE TECHNOLOGY SUCCESSFUL IN PUBLIC SESSIONS?

The computer-assisted process-facilitation techniques and technology provide members of the public, who otherwise could be inhibited, the ability to anonymously express their opinions. A trained facilitator and technician can take the information from these sessions, explore them with the group in a nonthreatening manner, and get even more detailed views and opinions from the group members.

The technology was used formally with the working group in October 1993 to provide instantaneous qualitative feedback on the opinions the group alternatives being proposed by the feasibility study team.

"The consensus of the project managers and the working group has been that the technology has opened a new vista for facilitating better understanding of issues associated with this project."

* The Wilson Learning Corporation's *Innovator* technology and process facilitation system is one of several computer-aided systems in the marketplace. This paper should not be construed to be an endorsement of any system; rather, this paper is a reporting of how this particular system was used in public meetings.

WHY DO GOVERNMENT MANAGERS FIND THE TECHNOLOGY A VALUABLE PROCESS IN PUBLIC MEETINGS?

A significant number of managers are not comfortable facilitating public meetings or interactive public sessions. Often, these managers are not trained in public interactive communications or process facilitation skills. Trained and experienced facilitators that also are knowledgeable of government culture, regulations, and processes can provide significant insight and assistance into how to secure information and opinions from the public. Such facilitators are usually viewed by the public as neutral and, in fact, *must* remain neutral to properly perform their function. This technology and facilitation process provides group members the opportunity to participate *anonymously* in making their opinions known. This is a critical feature of this system.

Many members of the public hold strong opinions, yet either feel intimidated or inadequate in their ability to express those opinions, feelings and judgements. This technology overcomes that barrier and when used properly with a process facilitation technique can provide valuable quantifiable and qualitative data.

"The computer-assisted process facilitation techniques and technology provides members of the public, who otherwise could be inhibited, the ability to anonymously express their opinions."

Government managers are under increasing pressure to ensure that the public's opinions are heard and responded to appropriately. Therefore government managers, by using the technology and a competent and experienced process facilitator, are not only meeting the mandate of public involvement but also are encouraging the spirit of such involvement. This positions the manager as responsive and concerned about getting good quality public feedback and enhances their credibility with the public and their management. Also, should something go wrong with either the technology or the facilitation process, the government manager is not positioned to accept total responsibility, but rather can turn to the facilitator or consultant for support, consultation and reassurance.

Finally, the cost of this computer-assisted technology and a trained facilitator is reasonable and fair. The technology does not require any capital investment by an agency unless, of course, the agency wishes to purchase their equipment, which they can do under a Government Services Administration (GSA) contract. The charges can be processed through a standard purchase order or short-term contract.

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(See Figs. 1-9.)

AUTHORS' BACKGROUND

L. Darryl Armstrong has extensive experience in working with constituency groups. As a senior manager for the Tennessee Valley Authority, he organized and arranged public feedback sessions for the TVA board of directors with environmental, political and consumer groups. He has served as Chief of Public Affairs for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Nashville District), Director of Information for TVA's Land Between The Lakes, and is Manager of Public Affairs for Oak Ridge National Laboratory. He is an experienced facilitator and consultant.

Gail Rymer is the Manager of Community Relations for the Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Inc., Environmental Restoration and Community Relations Program. She and Sandy Perkins, DOE's Manager of Community Relations in Oak Ridge, have successfully developed and implemented a nationally recognized community relations program.

Additional Information

For information on the East Fork Popular Creek working group:

Contact Gail Rymer or Kay Armstrong, Martin Marietta Energy Systems, Inc., Environmental Restoration and Waste Management, Community Relations, Oak Ridge, Tennessee 37830. Telephone: 615.576.6283

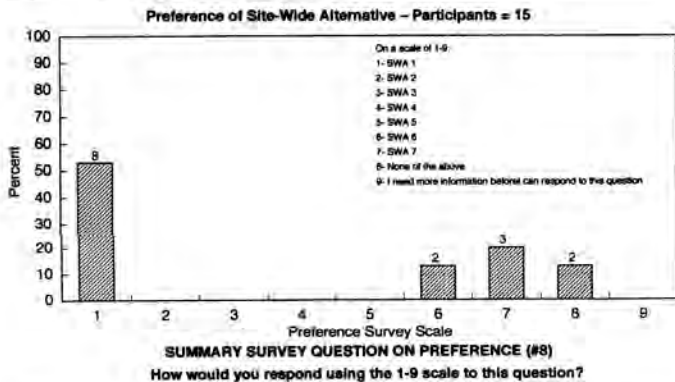


Fig. 1. Response to "which alternative is your preferred site-wide alternative?"

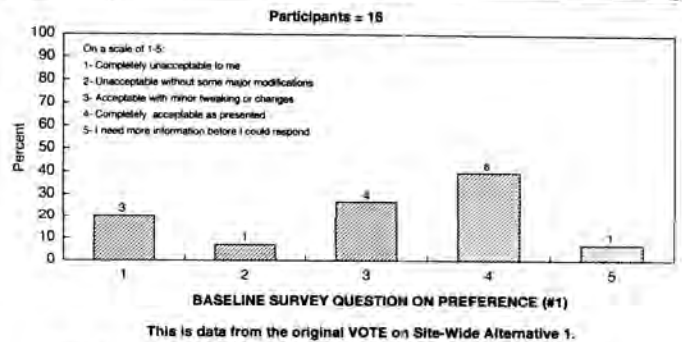


Fig. 2. "How acceptable is site-wide alternative 1?"

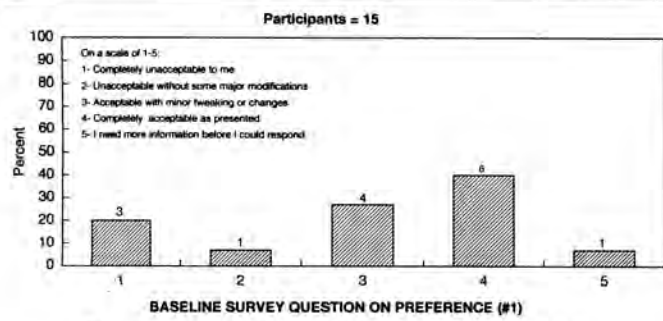


Fig. 3. "How acceptable is site-wide alternative 1?"

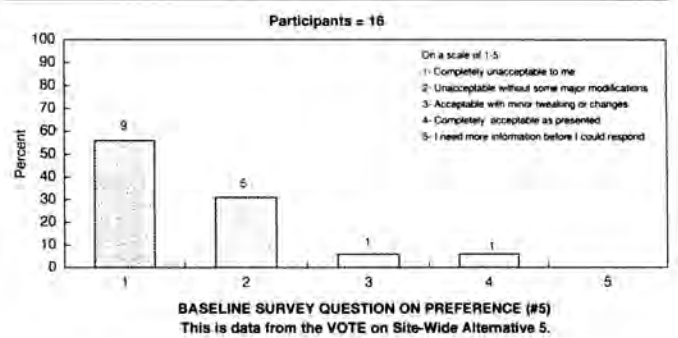


Fig. 7. "How acceptable is site-wide alternative 5?"

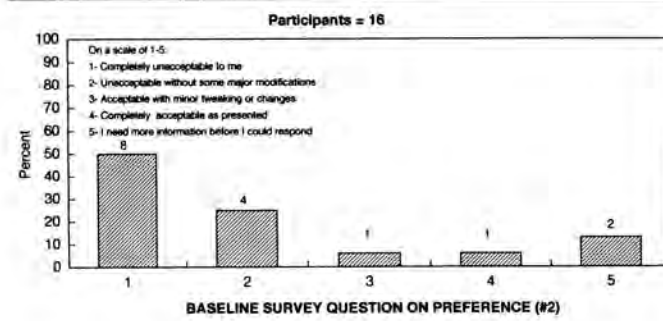


Fig. 4. "How acceptable is site-wide alternative 2?"

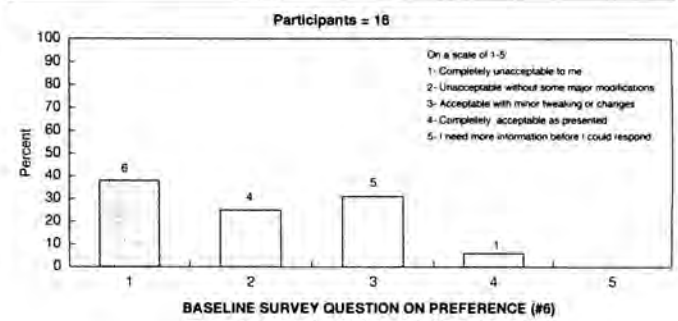


Fig. 8. "How acceptable is site-wide alternative 6?"

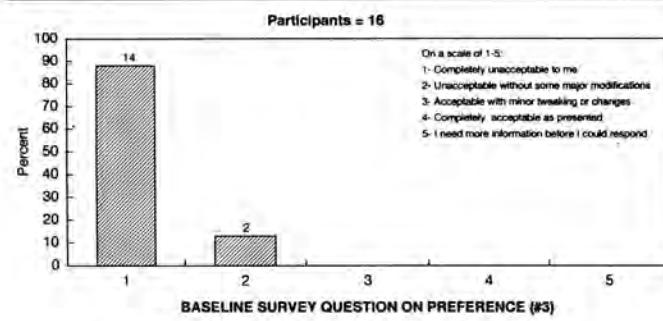


Fig. 5. "How acceptable is site-wide alternative 3?"

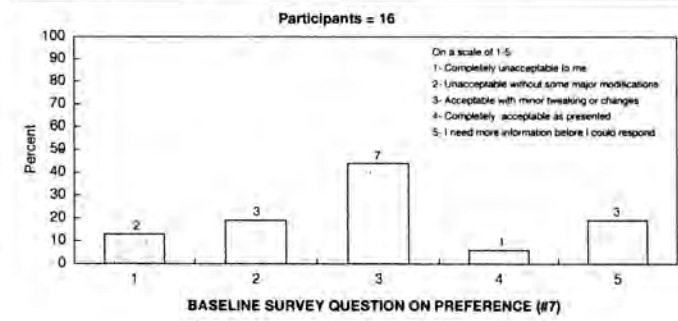


Fig. 9. "How acceptable is site-wide alternative 7?"

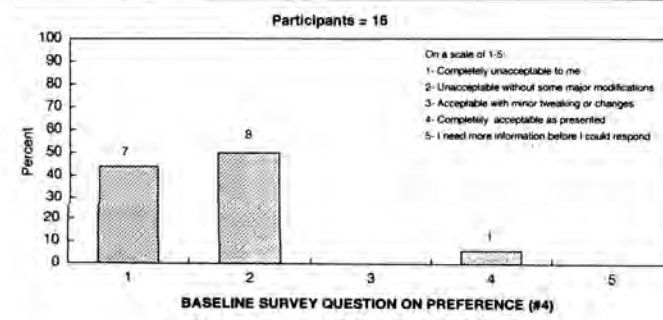


Fig. 6. "How acceptable is site-wide alternative 4?"