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REMOTE USABILITY TESTING OF THE UNECE WEBSITE

Supporting Paper

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I. INTRODUCTION

"On the Web, usability is a necessary condition for survival. If a website is difficult to use, people leave."

Dr. Jakob Nielsen[1]

1. Websites have become a key communication medium for statistical agencies and usability is a vital factor in good website design. Website usability testing is an inexpensive way to gather valuable feedback from representative users. This feedback can help web designers and content creators make the information we publish online more usable and relevant to our audiences.

2. The UNECE Statistical Division recently conducted tests of its current website (www.unece.org/stats) as a basis for redesigning the site's information architecture and establishing a benchmark for future usability studies. Tests were conducted remotely, allowing testers to be truly representative of users and significantly reducing costs.

[1] Nielsen, J (2003) 'Usability 101: Introduction to Usability', Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, 25 August 2003 accessed 29 March 2007 at http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030825.html. Jakob Nielsen has been described as "the king of usability" (Internet Magazine). He publishes articles, books and other resources about website usability.

II. WEBSITE USABILITY TESTING

A. Benefits and Methods of Usability Testing

"...I've spent a lot of time watching people use the Web, and the thing that has struck me most is the difference between how we think people use Web sites and how they actually use them."

Steve Krug, author of *Don't Make Me Think!*[2]

3. Usability tests provide an insight into how users interact with a website. Observing how people actually use your website can reveal issues that designers and programmers are unable to recognize themselves. Only by observing what a user does when trying to complete a 'typical' task on the website, can it be clear whether the site really works as intended.

4. A strong advantage of usability tests is they are relatively cheap and easy to conduct. At one end of the spectrum, usability tests can be held in a specially designed laboratory with one-way glass and systems enabling facilitators to interact with and observe the tester, recording their on-screen actions, facial expressions, and verbal feedback. At the other end of the spectrum, tests can be conducted at a person's desk with a facilitator simply observing and taking notes with a pen and paper. There is also the option of remote usability testing – using web-based software to view the screen of the tester as they work with the website from another physical location, such as their workplace or home. The tester and facilitator communicate over the telephone, as verbal feedback is an important component of usability tests.

5. Each method of usability testing has advantages and disadvantages. Laboratory testing can create an unnatural and inconvenient environment for the user, which may impact on test results. However, a well equipped laboratory enables more detailed recording and observation of the tester, making it easier to analyse results. Remote usability testing prevents a tester from having to travel to another physical location, significantly increasing the pool of potential testers. The disadvantages can include technical difficulties that may occur in the tester's or facilitator's environment. Also, unless the tester has a webcam, monitoring of feedback from facial expressions and other non-verbal communication is not possible.

6. Several studies of laboratory versus remote usability testing have found no reliable differences in the number and type of usability issues identified[3]. A comparative study conducted by Bolt Peters in 2002[4] supports this finding, but noted significant differences in cost and in time for recruitment and testing. In their study, laboratory testing was 50% more expensive and took seven times longer to complete than remote testing.

III. THE UNECE EXPERIENCE

A. Background

7. The UNECE Statistical Division website was established in 1995, primarily as a mechanism for disseminating documents to meeting participants. It has grown considerably since its inception and now includes hundreds of pages covering general information about division activities, statistical standards, publications, databases, and methodological and meeting papers.

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[2] Krug, S. (2000) *Don't Make Me Think! A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*, New Riders
[3] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) (2006), *Research-Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C. (p. 196).
[4] Houck-Whitaker, J. (2005) *Remote Testing versus Lab Testing*, accessed on 23 March 2007 at http://www.boltpeters.com/articles/versus.html

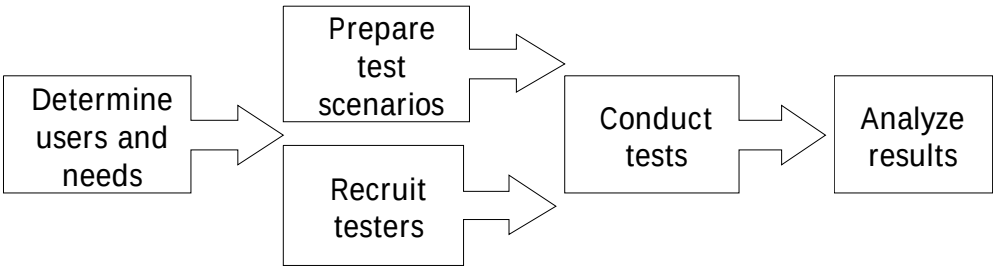
8. All websites need regular review to ensure they align with the goals of an organisation, provide information and services expected by their clients, and take advantage of changes in technology. The UNECE website needed a systematic review to ensure it is meeting users' needs. A plan for redesigning the website was developed involving a range of user-centric design activities, including website usability testing.

B. Methodology

"...the best method is to conduct a test where representative users interact with representative scenarios."[5]

9. The UNECE decided to conduct usability testing remotely in order to have a wide geographical representation of testers and to minimize costs and time required for testing. WebEx[6] web conferencing software was already in use in the organization, and this platform was found suitable for facilitating remote testing. WebEx allows applications being used on a remote computer to be viewed and/or controlled over the internet.

10. The UNECE approach to usability testing consisted of five phases: (a) determine users and their needs; (b) prepare test scenarios for each user group, representing typical tasks conducted on the website; (c) recruit testers that represent each user group; (d) conduct tests; and (e) analyze the results.



(a) Determine users and their needs

11. The fundamental step in a usability testing process is to determine who the website users are and what their needs are. This information should be the basis for all future website design decisions. Once this is determined, consideration can be given to how each type of user would use the website – what are the kinds of tasks they conduct and what information are they likely to be looking for?

12. The process used by the UNECE Statistical Division was to develop a proposed list of user groups based on staff experience and analysis of past user enquiries. A table of users and their needs was drafted and circulated to division staff to solicit their feedback. It was decided that users could be divided into five groups: (1) staff in statistical offices, (2) meeting delegates, (3) policy makers, (4) researchers, educators and students, and (5) the media. A detailed description of user analysis results can be found at Appendix A.

13. Due to time limitations it was decided that the first round of usability testing would focus on the highest priority user groups: staff in statistical offices, meeting delegates, and policy makers.

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[5] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) (2006), *Research-Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C.

[6] www.webex.com

(b) Prepare test scenarios

14. Test scenarios need to be representative of typical tasks conducted on the website. According to Digital Web Magazine[7], test scenarios should be:

- short – the user should spend most of their time completing the task rather than reading the scenario
- specific – clearly worded with a specific end goal
- realistic – typical of the activities of an average user on the site
- understandable/clear - in the user's language and related to the user's context.

15. Scenarios, or tasks, were prepared with these principles in mind. There was some overlap in needs between user groups, so there was some duplicity of tasks, increasing the quantity of results. Five to eight tasks were devised for each user group. In addition, there were five general tasks asked of every test participant. The tasks and expected answers are attached at Appendix B.

16. The scenarios were tested by colleagues within the UNECE Statistical Division to ensure they were achievable, could be completed within the expected time limit (45 – 60 minutes), and would be likely to reveal issues with usability.

(c) Recruit testers

17. Usability expert, Jakob Nielsen, recommends testing with around five users, or three users in each category when testing several groups of users[8]. The UNECE Statistical Division conducted nine tests, three for each of the high-priority user groups.

18. Testers were recruited through existing UNECE Statistical Division contacts in National Statistical Offices and from other organizations in the United Nations Secretariat. It was preferred if testers had minimal experience using the UNECE Statistical Division website, but were fairly experienced in using the internet, in accordance with the likely user profile.

19. Twenty potential testers were suggested by UNECE Statistical Division staff and these people were sent an email inviting them to participate. The majority responded positively, but availability was an issue for some. It was practical to invite more testers than necessary, as the target of nine testers was easily reached. Those people that were not able to participate in this round of testing will be invited to be involved in future tests.

20. This method of recruitment was successful, as the user groups had been clearly identified in an earlier phase and the testers fit these profiles. In other circumstances it could be important to ask potential testers to complete a brief survey or telephone interview, verifying that they have the required internet skills and knowledge of statistics, if applicable.

21. If contact with user groups is minimal and it is difficult to develop a pool of potential representative testers, there are companies that will recruit testers on your behalf. Another approach is the one used by the U.S. Energy Information Administration, which recruits their own testers by inviting volunteers through their website (http://www.eia.doe.gov/neic/aboutEIA/recruit.html).

(d) Conduct tests

22. The tests were scheduled and testers were sent an email containing a link to the web conferencing website and some basic instructions about joining the test. The questions were not sent beforehand to prevent users from trying the scenarios before the test and biasing the results. However, not having the questions in

[7] Kaufman, J. (2006) '*Practical Usability Testing*' in Digital Web Magazine accessed on 29 March at http://www.digital-web.com/articles/practical_usability_testing/.
[8] Nielsen, J. (2000) 'Why You Only Need to Test With 5 Users', Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, 19 March 2000 accessed 29 March 2007 at http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20000319.html.

advance proved to cause some delays and technical difficulties, as a file containing the questions had to be downloaded and printed before the test could commence.

23. The tests took 45-60 minutes each and were facilitated by three staff in the User Services Section of the UNECE Statistical Division, one of which had prior experience with usability testing. The test started when the facilitators telephoned the tester at the agreed time, and then proceeded through the following stages:

- Introduction – introduce facilitators and explain how the test will work
- Technicalities – connect to web conferencing software (involves downloading a browser plug-in) and download and print document containing tasks to be completed
- Pre-test questions – a series of questions about the tester's operating environment (browser, monitor, operating system, etc) and their general experience with the UNECE Statistical Division website
- Work through the tasks – testers were asked to work through the tasks at their own pace, but to speak about what they were thinking as they used the site and made decisions to click on certain links
- Post-test questions – general questions about the tester's impression and experience using the site

(e) Analyse results

24. Notes taken during testing (see template at Appendix B) were written up into a brief report, using a template from www.usability.gov[9]. The usability issues were grouped and prioritised, providing clear support for several key recommendations to improve website design.

25. This was the first in a series of tests planned throughout the UNECE Statistical Division website redesign project. It has provided valuable feedback about issues with the current site design and will provide a benchmark against which future tests (conducted after site redesign) can be compared.

C. Findings

26. The testing revealed important usability issues with the UNECE Statistical Division website. The most unexpected of these was the strong tendency to use the banner navigation bar (part of the UNECE's corporate look and feel) rather than the upper left menu specific to the pages of the Statistical Division. This caused confusion as users were redirected to sections of the UNECE website, and away from content specific to the Statistical Division, without realising the distinction. The choice of navigation has a significant impact on usability and will be a key consideration in the site's redesign.

27. Other valuable findings included:

- identification of several terms and acronyms that were confusing or meaningless
- the search engine was intermittently effective
- pages crowded with text and links were overwhelming for the user.

IV. CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

28. Remote usability testing is a valuable tool, particularly when users are dispersed across a wide geographical area. Planning and conducting tests of this nature is not resource intensive and the feedback is highly valuable. It is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain this quality of information about an interface without some form of usability testing.

29. If these usability tests had been conducted in a local laboratory, rather than remotely, it is likely that the usability issues identified would have been similar (particularly those relating to navigation), but possibly fewer and less relevant. The reason being that test outcomes are impacted by the extent to which testers are representative of website users. The main users of the UNECE Statistical Division website (staff in statistical organizations and participants at meetings about statistical issues) are expected to have at least a general, if not highly specialized, knowledge of statistics. Users are also from many locations across a wide

[9] http://www.usability.gov/templates/index.html#usareports

geographical area. It would have been challenging to recruit testers that were representative of these users if local laboratory testing had been the chosen approach.

30. Lessons learned through this round of usability testing include:
- have contingency plans in place in case technical problems occur
- provide questions to the participants by email in plenty of time before the test is scheduled to start. It saves time and ensures the tester knows what to expect
- recording the screen movements and verbal feedback could provide more material for detailed analysis of the tests. It can be challenging to take good notes and observe actions during the test.

31. Volunteers who would like to be involved in future usability tests conducted by UNECE Statistical Division can please contact Jessica Gardner (jessica.gardner@unece.org).

UNECE Statistics Division Website – Who are our Users? Website Redesign Project 2006/07

The UNECE Statistics website is available to anyone with an internet connection, but who are we really aiming at? To do a good job, a website must be designed with the needs of particular users in mind. It cannot be all things to all people, but should aim to meet the needs of the **main** user groups.

To achieve this, we need to know who our users are (or who they should be) and what they might use our website for.

The table below describes our main users, based on information collected from division staff in 2005. The information in the table will be used to design questions and tasks for usability testing. It should include all of our important users, that is, those people we want think about when redesigning the site.

User Group	Priority	Description / Comment	What they want from our website
Staff in Statistical Offices (SO)	1	Includes people working in National and International Statistical Offices. These users know about statistics, and some of them are familiar with the institutional setup of the UN and UNECE statistics. Statisticians from other ministries and government agencies that form part of the national statistical service are also included in this group.	o Latest information about any area of statistics (sorted by subject / topic of interest) – includes: • Standards and methodological information • Ongoing activities including future meetings • Task forces / working groups (who, what, where, when, how) • Publications (issued) • Online resources (includes: DISA and the Statistical Database, online publications, etc) • Reports and papers from the past meetings, final outputs of task forces and working groups o How to get technical assistance from UNECE o Links to other statistical offices in the region
Meeting delegates	1	Want everything they need to know as an attendee of a meeting. These people usually also fit into the 'Staff in Statistical Offices' group above, but have other needs specific to attending a meeting. While up to 20% are new delegates who have never participated to the UNECE organized events, the rest are returning clients, who are familiar with the procedures and know UNECE staff.	o Meeting details – dates, agenda, venue, etc. (early before the meeting) o Papers for the upcoming meeting (in advance of the meeting) o Reports, presentations, papers, including room documents after the meeting o Information about the host city (Geneva or other city) o Accreditation/registration process, including visa applications

User Group	Priority	Description / Comment	What they want from our website
Policy makers	2	People who use statistics in their work developing policies, programmes, or similar tasks. These users don't work in a statistical office, and usually don't know much about statistics.	o Easy to retrieve, reliable statistical data and metadata o Links to other suppliers of data o Resources to improve their understanding / statistical literacy o Support and contacts for more information
Researchers, Educators and Students	3	These people know something about statistics and are experienced users of the internet. They have precise interests related to their research or study projects. In the majority of cases, they enquire about statistical data. Usually those who (themselves or their universities) cooperate with statistical offices, also enquire about methodological issues.	o Detailed statistical data and metadata o Information on latest statistical methodologies o Publications and papers o Links to other statistical offices in the region o Online resources for learning
Media	4	Looking for news or information to support their articles. These people don't know much about statistics. They look for information that can be easily obtained and simply explained, and they rarely intend to go into a greater depth.	o News articles (such as the UNECE Weekly articles) o Press releases o Statistical data and very clear metadata
Information needed by all users, including those not specified above			o About us - who we are and what we do • Our place within the UN System • Governance structure • Organizational structure • Calendar of meetings • Programme of work • Task forces / working groups o Contact us

UNECE Statistics Division Website – Usability Testing **Website Redesign Project 2006/07**

Scope: Navigation and discoverability of content on the UNECE Statistical Division Website – www.unece.org/stats/

Ease of querying and analysing results from the UNECE Statistical Database – http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog/statfile1_new.asp

Purpose: To see if users can find what they are looking for in the UNECE website and database, and uncover any important usability issues. Results of this test will be a benchmark for future tests and the information gathered will help in developing a more user-centric website design.

Instructions to give the tester before the test starts:

- Set up connection to webex (unece.webex.com)
- Print list of tasks
- Welcome the tester and explain what is being tested. Make clear we are testing the UNECE Statistical Division website (www.unece.org/stats/) and not them so they can't make a mistake.
- You will be given a series of tasks to work through using the site. If you are unable to complete a task, just move on to the next one.
- Please think aloud (say what you are thinking) as you go through each of the tasks. This helps us understand what is going through your mind when you are making decisions.
- We will observe what they do on-screen and will take notes – may have to install software for remote testing.
- At the end of the session, we have some general questions to ask.

Pre-test interview questions

- Monitor size and resolution
- Operating system
- Internet browser
- Used UNECE Statistical Division website before? Database?
- How long have you been using the internet?
- How often do you use the internet?

Instructions for test facilitators

- We MUST NOT give hints or assistance to complete the tasks. If a user fails to successfully complete the task, then there is strong evidence of a usability problem. If they struggle, or ask for help, a good solution is often to say, "Thank you for what you have done. We have learned a lot from that. Let's go on to a different task."
- You can ask questions to get a better understanding of the user's thinking, such as 'What made you decide to click on that link?', 'I'm interested in what you would expect to see if you clicked on x'.

Consider the following when observing the test:

- Are the test participants able to complete the task scenarios successfully?
- Considering successfully completed tasks
  - How fast do participants do each task?
  - How many pages (clicks) does it take to complete each task?
- Analyze both frequency and severity or usability problems. How often did the same problem occur? How much of a problem is it?
- Do participants click to pages or do they use search?
- What words do they use most when searching?
- Is the search box in a good location and is it large enough for most of the words used?
- How satisfied are participants with the site?
- What changes are needed to make sure that the site will enable more users to perform more successfully?

User Group: Staff in Statistical Offices (SO)

Tasks to complete	Answers	Successfully completed?	Number of clicks	Time taken	Observations
1. Your manager has asked you to find out what you can about Statistical Metadata. What resources exist on the UNECE website? 2. Find the Recommendations for 2010 Censuses of Population and Housing. 3. Can the UNECE website help you find out what the population of Bulgaria was in 1995? 4. Can you find out which country in the EU 15* had the highest GDP per capita in US$ in 1990? And in 2005? 5. What kind of technical assistance does the UNECE provide to its member countries? 6. Download the report from the last Conference of European Statisticians (CES) meeting. 7. Who are the members of the CES Bureau? 8. Can you find a link to other United Nations statistical organizations?	1. Several possibilities – best is to find Common Metadata Framework website (http://www.unece.org/stats/cmf/Welcome.html) o Publications > Common Metadata Framework o Documents library > by subject > Metadata o Search – will bring up list of papers that could be useful. 2. http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/ece/ces/ge.41/2006/zip.1.e.pdf Possible paths: o Link on LHS of home page o Publications > CES Recommendations 2010 Documents Library > subject > Recommendations listed under Methodology o Search gets 2000 version 3. 8 406 067 (Gender DB) 8 297 000 (Economic DB) 4. Luxembourg for both 5. UNECE Statistical Programme - Activities 1.5, 4.1 and 4.2 or DISA 5.7 Possible paths: o Statistical Programme > Activities 1.5, 4.1 and 4.2 o DISA > by subject/domain > 5.7 o Search gets PDFs only 6. Report ECE / CES / 70 from http://www.unece.org/stats/archive/00.02.e.htm Possible paths: o Plenary Sessions (1995 -) on home page > June 2006 o About CES > Plenary sessions > June 2006 o Documents Library > sorted by subject > CES Plenary Sessions > June 2006 7. http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/3000.00.bureau.e.htm Possible paths: o Link on home page to Bureau of the Conference o About CES (on home page) > Bureau of the CES 8. http://www.unece.org/stats/links_int.htm#international Possible paths: o Links on home page left menu > International agencies or UN Agencies o Quick links on right menu to WWW links > International agencies or UN Agencies				

User Group: Meeting delegates

Tasks to complete	Answers	Successfully completed?	Number of clicks	Time taken	Observations
1. You are going to be attending a UNECE workshop on Disability Statistics in December 2006. a) What are the dates? b) Where is this meeting being held? c) What is the address of the meeting venue?	1. (a) 13-15 December 2006 1. (b) Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic or Kyrgystan 1. (c) Hotel Ak-Keme, Prospekt Mira 93, 720044 Bishkek				
2. A colleague recently attended a UNECE meeting on Statistical Dissemination and has recommended you read the papers. a) Find the page where you can download them. b) When was that meeting held?	2. (a) http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2006.09.dissemination.htm 2. (b) 12-14 September 2006				
3. You are going to be going to Geneva to attend a meeting next March, but you don't know anything about the city. Can you find any information on the UNECE website?	3. http://www.unece.org/stats/geneva.e.htm (link on lower LHS of home page)				
4. Where do delegates have to report before getting into the UN building in Geneva?	4. As written on page found in step 3 - Prior to the session, delegates are requested to present themselves at the **Security Identification Unit**, located at the **Pregny Gate, 14, Avenue de la Paix**, for the issuance of an identification badge.				
5. When was the last work session on gender statistics held?	5. 11-13 September 2006 (Geneva) - http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2006.09.gender.htm				
6. Download the report of the most recent meeting on Consumer Price Indices.	6. Available at: http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2006.05.cpi.htm Actual link: http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/ece/ces/ge.22/2006/mtg2/2.e.pdf (English)				
7. Download the PowerPoint presentation given by Germany at the Work Session on statistical data editing in May 2005 entitled "**Introducing and implementing a new data editing strategy**" (WP.14).	7. Available at: http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2005.05.sde.htm Actual link: http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/2005/05/sde/wp.14.e.ppt				

User Group: Policy makers

Tasks to complete	Answers	Successfully completed?	Number of clicks	Time taken	Observations
1. How many databases does the UNECE maintain and what are they called? 2. Using the UNECE Statistical Database at http://w3.unece.org/pxweb/Dialog/statfile1_new.asp, complete the following tasks: a. Using the Macroeconomic overview in internationally comparable prices, compare the population and employment growth rates in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan over the last ten years. b. Using the data found in step (a), which country had the highest population growth rate in 2001. c. Out of France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom, which country had the highest proportion of female smokers (aged 15 or more) in the year 2000? d. What was the original source of the data you found in step (c)? 3. You have been asked to gather information on Canada's annual Consumer Price Index (CPI) from the UNECE Statistical Database. a. What was Canada's CPI in the period 1990 – 2005. b. You need to know how CPI is calculated and what it means. Does the UNECE database provide any explanatory information? c. You think you've found an error in the data and want to report it. Who would you contact? 4. You need trade statistics on countries outside the UNECE region. Can you find a link to the statistical databases of other United Nations organizations? 5. Can you find a page that explains what Gender Statistics is, and why we need them?	(a) 5 – 7 depending on whether people call Trends and Robotics publications a database. DISA, stats@unece, Human Settlements Database, Demographic Database, Gas Centre Database, Trends 2005, Robotics 2. (a) See screen shot 2(a) for view of correct answer. 2. (b) Kyrgyzstan with 0.8 (Kazakhstan had –0.2). 2. (c) Gender > Health > Smokers as % of population. Answer is Spain with 27.2 % 2. (d) National statistical offices (see footnote). 3. (a) Economic > Price indices and interest rates > by Year. See screen shot 3 (a) for data. 3. (b) Yes, in the footnotes. 3. (c) Email link at bottom of page, or click on the "i" button for information about the contact person (Artur Andrysiak). 4. The Data On-line page (http://www.unece.org/stats/data.htm) has a link to UNSD databases. 5. Home page > link to Gender Statistics Website in bottom RH corner > Making Gender Statistics (LHS menu) > links to What is Gender statistics and then from there > Why do we need Gender Statistics Search will bring up Gender Statistics website pages, from where similar navigation path can be followed.				

User Group: All Users

Tasks to complete	Answers	Successfully completed?	Number of clicks	Time taken	Observations
1. How would you contact someone at the UNECE Statistical Division to request more information? 2. How many task forces does the UNECE Statistics Division coordinate? 3. Who is the contact for the Steering Group on Sustainable Development? 4. What is the organizational structure of the UNECE? 5. Find a list of UNECE member countries.	1. support.stat@unece.org in footer on every page. Contact UNECE in the header takes users to a page with info.ece@unece.org as the contact email. 2. Listed at http://www.unece.org/stats/ToS.html. There are 12 task forces, 9 Steering Groups and 1 organizing committee. 3. Lidia Bratanova 4. About UNECE (header) > UNECE in a Nutshell > Organizational Structure (http://www.unece.org/oes/nutshell/organizational_structure.pdf) 5. Link in bottom right corner of home page, or About UNECE (header menu) then UNECE Member Countries.				

- What is your overall impression of the site?
- How would you describe finding what you were looking for on this site today?
- What is your impression of the database capability?
- What did you like best about the Web site?
- What did you like least about the Web site?
- If you were the Web site developer, what would be the first thing you would do to improve the Web site?