

EARN Document

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THE E.A.R.N. ASSOCIATION 1990 - 1995
mission and strategy
a discussion paper
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1. Introduction

The E.A.R.N. Association is on the edge of taking important initiatives which will determine its position for the next five years. It is questionable if the Association's mission, as it was defined in 1985, will be a sufficient base to do so. This paper suggests to start re-thinking the Association's mission, according to the expected environment of the 90's and the future needs of its members.

2. The need of re-thinking Earn's mission.

The E.A.R.N. Association was founded in February 1985. Looking back at its first five year of existence, it can be stated that the foundation of the E.A.R.N. Association and the establishment of the EARN network was a break-through in scientific networking in Europe. The participants in Earn have proved that a big need existed in Europe for scientific networking and that this need could be met by a mix of vision, pragmatism and financial support. By its mere performance Earn has provoked others, including national and international governmental bodies to pay attention to the need for scientific networking services, to draft policies and to take actions in this field.

During the last five years the world of networking has changed dramatically. There is a clear need for more performance and a higher level of functionality. Standardisation has made a considerable progress and manufacturers have changed there marketing policies accordingly. These developments have changed Earn's environment and Earn has reacted on those changes by adapting itself tactically. It started new alliances and defined new actions to protect the interests of its members.

As a pioneer in scientific networking services Earn certainly can play also an important role in the future development of this field. However Earn should take into account that the role it can play will depend on the way other parties, to begin with its members, will recognise this role. We can assume that the members of Earn will find themselves in a situation that is different from 1985. This situation will generate different networking needs, and other requirements for their Association Earn. Earn should not deny its new environment, it should recognise that it must not capitalise much longer on its mission of 1985 alone, on the penalty of getting still more in the defence than can be seen today. A policy of flexible tactics is not enough anymore.

The Association has an obligation to its members to make an assessment of its current position and to be ready to adapt its mission if necessary in the interest of its members. New policies and actions to be launched, such as the OSI-transition plan will have to be in accordance with a redefined mission. Such a mission should be communicated to all members but also to Earn's external relations (stake holders). A lack of understanding by those stake holders of Earn's current mission has already damaged the effectiveness of Earn's actions.

3. Earn's changing environment.

Compared with the Association, as described in its Statutes, and looking at it's actual status, Earn is very different from 1985. Due

to the emerging national scientific networks, Earn's role is shifting from national towards international networking services. Earn's alliances with major computer manufacturers have changed. Earn has committed itself to OSI and to migrate existing network services to OSI-services. The telecommunication regulations in Europe are in a process of change, which will create a continuing uncertainty about the legal framework in which Earn will have to work during the next five years. The opportunities for public funding of scientific networking services are increasing and users will be able to find alternatives for Earn in the market-place. The increasing need for networking services will require suppliers with professional skills in operations, marketing and finance. This will ask for a legal status that will give the suppliers and their users the necessary protection and flexibility. Initiatives as the Rare association and the COSINE-project are for Earn a threat and an opportunity at the same time.

When re-thinking Earn's mission for the 90's its is important to make an assessment of the Association's supposed strengths and weaknesses. Such an assessment will help to determine if certain external developments should be considered as threats or opportunities.

In this paper I can mention only some factors briefly for discussion. I could mention as strong points for Earn:

- The provision of the Earn networking services, in particular the services with respect to access and dissemination of information (Listserv) has created goodwill with a large international user community. Earn users generally can be considered as leading edge users and pioneers in computer networking. The name "Earn" stands internationally for a brand in scientific networking services. Other parties still have to make such a customer build-up and to prove their performance in international networking services.
- Earn has a proven record in supplying connections to the USA.
- Earn has gathered much operational experience and assembled under its banner an experienced staff.
- Its structure enables the Earn Board to handle quickly and with flexibility, without much bureaucracy and inefficient procedures.

A number of inherent weaknesses can be mentioned as well:

- The network is technologically not in line with state-of-the-art concepts for system's interconnection. It carries on its back an inherit need for future migration.
- The Association has an image of dependency of specific hardware manufacturers.
- The Association lacks an own cash-flow or other resources for investments
- Earn's current operations have a very complex financial dependency

on uncertain national and international sources.

- The network is vulnerable, due to the regulatory instability in Europe.
- Earn's membership is restricted to academic and other non-profit research institutes; industrial research is not represented on an equal level.
- The Association is often identified with people rather than with objectives. It has a typical "club structure".
- The Association has no professional experience in marketing.
- Due to tax legislation and the liability of its members the Earn's legal form as an Association is a restriction for large scale service operations.

It is certainly a major opportunity for Earn that national and international governments are increasingly recognising the value of networking services for the quality of research and development. Earn's goodwill with end users and its international networking skills can be considered as an enormous asset to play a role in initiatives like the COSINE project. At the same time Earn's position could be severely threatened by an increasing involvement of governments in scientific networking services, if Earn would not succeed to make clear that it is only acting in the interest of its members and not fighting for particular vested interests.

4. Strategic options for the Earn Association

Considering the strengths and weaknesses of Earn and the possible threats and opportunities this paper will point briefly at the strategic options that the author thinks that are existing for the Earn Association. Those options certainly will have to be subject to further study.

As an association a starting point for a revised mission of Earn should be its continuing obligation to work for the interests of its members and its staff.

It is obvious that its revised mission should also capitalise on the strong characteristics of Earn and on its proven performance. It should however not try to compete for tasks for which other parties are better positioned.

In all options Earn should act quickly and with flexibility, making use of its non-bureaucratic structure.

The first option for Earn is that it concentrates its mission as an association to represent the community of the users of scientific networking, both on the level of universities and institutes, and on

the level of the various disciplines of research. Current initiatives in networking tend to be heavily driven by suppliers and funding bodies. Earn is very well positioned to build up a further backing by the scientific users and their organisations as a countervailing power. By doing so it could also very effectively guarantee that the interests of its current membership in a smooth migration towards open networking services, are well taken care of.

The second strategic option for Earn is to play a major role in the implementation of COSINE-funded networking and information services. It has the skill's and the experience and could make a rapid start. It can be expected that the funding partners in COSINE want to minimise the risks of implementation of the COSINE services. It will be necessary that it comes to an understanding between Earn and the Rare Association over the best way COSINE can be implemented and which role fits best for which party.

As an association Earn is, like Rare, not in a position to take operational risks for the supply of networking services itself. However it could very well play an important role in establishing a professional international service organisation for this purpose.

5. Actions to take

In order to proceed on a road as described in this proposal it will be necessary that the Board of Directors decides to give priority to a discussion on Earn's mission for the 90's, before committing the association to operational plans and projects, that are not well founded on its Statutes and its original objectives. Based on the results of this discussion the Board works out a proposal and submits it for decision.

A General Meeting, as described in the Statutes could be assembled, in order to create a strong backing by the members for the Board's decisions on the Association's revised strategic mission.

The Officers and the Board of Directors should take care that the external stake holders, like the governments, the Commission of the European Communities, the national networks and the suppliers who are supporting Earn, will be well informed about Earn's strategic intentions and about the way Earn will act when defending the interests of its members. Earn should make it clear that is it eager to play a major, constructive but indispensable role on the stage of international networking. For this role it brings in the backing of its user community and the experience of its staff.