

Center for **RURAL** **ENTREPRENEURSHIP**



Minnesota Rural Partners

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BizPathways – Minnesota’s Virtual Entrepreneurs Network: Ongoing Evaluation of Effective Practice

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About this Publication

In 2002, the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship began an evaluation of Minnesota's Virtual Entrepreneur Network/BizPathways initiative. This evaluation was to occur throughout the project's three years of funding from the U.S. Department of Commerce. Because of changes in the project, we plan to continue the evaluation through 2005. This report summarizes both the history and implementation of the initiative over its first 2½ years. As a result, this report should be viewed as a work in progress.

The VEN evaluation is one of a number of evaluation activities that the Center has ongoing. This is the first report issued in our *Evaluation Case Studies Series*.

About the Authors

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Minnesota's BizPathways Network: Ongoing Evaluation of Effective Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Minnesota has a long tradition of innovative economic development. Hard working and enterprising immigrants settled the “land of lakes”. Through entrepreneurial initiative they built entirely new communities, thousands of businesses and remarkable civic institutions ranging from the Mayo Clinic in Rochester to strong local governments. The new economy is often equated with warm places like Florida or Arizona. Although Minnesota is part of the old rust belt, the state has been a national leader in re-inventing its economy. It has world-class companies and industries and is well positioned in the new economy of the 21st Century.

Like most of America, rural areas in Minnesota are struggling when compared to the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul or even larger trade center communities like Rochester, St. Cloud and Duluth. The farming-dependent regions of southwestern Minnesota are facing the same challenges as farming areas in Iowa, Nebraska and South Dakota: farm consolidation, low commodity prices and falling incomes; failing main streets and high out-migration of young people. Northern Minnesota is in transition from an economy based on mining, timber and recreational tourism. Communities once enriched by manufacturing are struggling with plant closings or how to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

Minnesota is geographically diverse with a number of regional economies. This diversity makes economic development a challenge, particularly in rural regions. Recognizing this challenge, Minnesota Rural Partners, the state's rural development council, and others developed the Virtual Entrepreneurial Network (VEN), now the BizPathways Network, as a means of energizing entrepreneurs throughout the state to build more competitive regional economies. Although the project is not fully mature, the learning from this innovative model provides important lessons to other regions and states that are interested in encouraging entrepreneurship as an economic development strategy for rural places.

This report is a work in process, as is the Minnesota BizPathways initiative. We begin with a history of the VEN initiative in Section I followed by a description of the project and its centerpiece, BizPathways, in Section II. Then Section III describes some of the key learning to date regarding the project. Finally, we conclude in Section IV with a brief discussion of the future direction of the project and some of the critical decision points or challenges that lie ahead.

SECTION I HISTORY OF THE VEN/BIZPATHWAYS INITIATIVE

Minnesota was part of an initial group of discovery states (along with Maine, Missouri and West Virginia) sponsored by the Rural Entrepreneurship Initiative and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation in 1999-2001.¹ As a discovery state, Minnesota engaged in a learning and strategy building process or academy focused on energizing entrepreneurial talent in rural Minnesota. This process gave birth to the Minnesota Rural Entrepreneurship Initiative and Minnesota Rural Partners (MRP) provided the visionary leadership for this effort. The origins of the Virtual Entrepreneurial Network can be found in the work of the Minnesota discovery state process.

The VEN initiative grew out of recognition that Minnesota is a remarkably diverse and large state. As a result, access to business development services varies across the state with relatively rich resources in the Twin Cities area and much more varied levels of resources and services in the more rural regions and communities. Reflecting these realities, the Minnesota Rural Entrepreneurship Initiative concluded that an electronic network to support entrepreneurs might be a strategic next step for energizing entrepreneurial talent in rural Minnesota.

Minnesota Rural Partners (MRP), among the strongest and most effective state rural development councils in the United States, provided the leadership needed to build on the collaborative engagement from the discovery state process. Skilled at building partnerships to launch needed projects, MRP built a collaboration in 2001 to create an electronic network for rural entrepreneurs in Minnesota. Serving as the lead partner, MRP enlisted other key partners including state government, higher education, private companies and others. It also prepared and submitted a proposal to the U.S. Department of Commerce's Technology Opportunities Program (TOP), a highly competitive national program. MRP's 2001 proposal was successful, providing the initial capitalization for the project to move forward.

SECTION II ABOUT THE BIZPATHWAYS NETWORK

The Virtual Entrepreneurial Network created through this process is BizPathways. The MRP web site describes BizPathways as “both a place and interest-based community network for peer support (Entrepreneurial Community Clusters) and an Internet portal (bizpathways.org) with advanced technology tools to guide and incubate entrepreneurial activity” (<http://www.minnesotaruralpartners.org/venhistory.htm>). In 2002, the capacity to develop this tool was organized and the BizPathways resource was built. The

¹ The Rural Entrepreneurship Initiative laid the groundwork for the creation of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in 2001.

collaborative worked to engage service providers in the network and to work with communities to create awareness of and interest in this new resource. Four pilot communities were targeted in 2002: Fosston, Gaylord, Rushford and Virginia. Despite the normal startup challenges, progress was strong and engagement high among the partners in the project.² The first full year of operation for BizPathways was 2003.

BizPathways is an online service for people who are interested in starting or growing a business in Minnesota as well as the service providers and communities that support them. Entrepreneurs can register at no cost and take advantage of resources such as business plan templates as well as opportunities for online networking with other entrepreneurs and accessing services. Registered entrepreneurs can be matched to the resources within their own region. Service providers can use the website as a way of marketing their programs to those entrepreneurs who need them. BizPathways also provides opportunities for communities to develop plans for supporting entrepreneurs through Entrepreneurial Community on-site training.

In 2003, we completed a baseline assessment of a sample of BizPathways users. Between its launch in October 2002 and June 2003, BizPathways had 321 registered users, including entrepreneurs, service providers and “interested persons”. Most of the registered users were from Minnesota (70%) and 58% had not started a business before. Over 1,100 service providers were listed as resources on BizPathways as of June 2003. However, most of these listings were placed onto the site by BizPathways staff rather than the service providers themselves. The need to engage the service provider community in supporting this resource is discussed below.

Feedback from a very limited sample of users suggests that the content of the site is relevant, particularly the business planning tools. However, there is a strong need to conduct more systematic market research of both entrepreneur and service provider users of the system to evaluate whether the content and presentation of the site meet their needs.

Analysis of BizPathways.org website statistics shows some interesting trends in usage of the site (see summary included as Appendix B). In March 2004, there were 943 registered users of BizPathways. However, a relatively small percent of visitors to the web site (3%) actually visit the login page where registration can occur. It is not clear how many of these visitors actually complete the registration process. Visitors to the web site have been relatively consistent over the April 2003-March 2004 period, averaging about 1,650 visitors per month (excluding automated programs that search websites, i.e., spiders or bots). However, there is an upward trend in visits, with March 2004 reaching a high of almost 2,100 visitors.

While hits on the system continued to grow and remain strong in 2004, the BizPathways network faces several challenges in the years ahead:

² As part of our evaluation of VEN/BizPathways, we conducted interviews with representatives of the partner organizations during project development in 2002 and again in 2003. For a list of the partner representatives interviewed, see Appendix A.

- **Increase usage by entrepreneurs.** There has been growing usage and good repeat usage of the site by entrepreneurs. However, this number will need to increase significantly in 2004 to validate the value of this project. The challenge, as with most services for rural entrepreneurs, is increasing awareness of this resource throughout rural Minnesota and then showing entrepreneurs the value of participation.
- **Increase participation of service providers as contributors and users.** Active service provider participation is critically important to ensuring the value of the BizPathways resource to entrepreneurs and communities. To be sustainable, the service providers need to embrace BizPathways as a resource for them and contribute to it by maintaining up-to-date information about their programs and services. The value of BizPathways as a network for entrepreneurs will be determined by the team's success in engaging more broadly service providers throughout the state.
- **Enhanced engagement of communities.** Most rural entrepreneurs operate within the context of their home communities. If these communities encourage and support entrepreneurship through their active promotion of BizPathways and other entrepreneurship development activities, then we would expect greater participation in BizPathways. In fact, a surge in registered users of BizPathways in spring/early summer 2003 could be attributed to the Rural Roundup information sessions about BizPathways held throughout Minnesota during that period.

SECTION III

KEY LEARNING TO DATE

Robust and sustainable economic development initiatives do not evolve over night. It is important to remember that this project was first proposed in 2001 and is less than three years old. This initiative is also a very aggressive and visionary project, combining place-based activities with virtual networking. BizPathways reaches beyond the traditional way of encouraging economic development. As such, this initiative offers a number of key learning opportunities for other regions and states. The key learning to date is related to the following:

- Elements of model practice.
- Addressing rural isolation.
- Lack of systemic institutional support and sustainability concerns.
- Power of civic entrepreneurs.
- Community engagement.

ELEMENTS OF MODEL PRACTICE

The VEN/BizPathways initiative demonstrates several elements of model practice that are relevant to others pursuing entrepreneurship development strategies. Specifically,

this initiative demonstrates the power of a collaborative approach and the importance of being entrepreneur-focused.

Collaborative Approach. One critical learning opportunity associated with VEN/BizPathways is its unique organizational structure. VEN is organized as a collaborative partnership. Minnesota Rural Partners (MRP) served as the initiator of VEN and the common point linking the various partners to this project. The partners view MRP as the lead organization in the partnership. There is a clear understanding that MRP created this project, recruited partners to it and must continue to play the role of lead partner if this project is to succeed and sustain itself. One key feature of this collaborative is its public-private partnership. MRP engaged state government, including strong support from the Ventura administration, educational institutions, and private sector partners in the initial discussions about the goals and direction for the VEN/BizPathways initiative. This public-private partnership ensured broad-based support for the project and was important to obtaining the TOP grant.

The collaborative has proven to be organically flexible enabling the partnership to evolve over time. This flexibility was critically important to moving the partnership to a different but more effective structure as the project advanced. The project has moved from a cooperative model to more of a corporate model. Instead of a group of partnering organizations, a core team, led by MRP, has emerged that appears to be highly motivated, focused, engaged and effective. The team includes passionate and competent members in all three of Ernesto Sirolli's core areas: production, management and marketing. The collaborative nature of the initiative is maintained by the direct engagement of the core corporate team with current and potential partners on specific interest areas.

The changing nature of the collaborative represents a critical development in the project that has contributed to increased operational and strategic efficiency. At the same time, however, this change has the potential to reduce broader stakeholder engagement and support. This organizational change occurred at the same time that the initiative's relationship with state government has evolved. When the VEN/BizPathways project was initially created, there was a strong relationship between the project and the state of Minnesota. Governor Ventura was interested in entrepreneurship. There was a strong working relationship between the Commissioner of the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). Since that time, a new administration, a growing state fiscal crisis and leadership change within DEED have weakened the collaboration with the state requiring the project to build new relationships with new state players from top to bottom.

The evolving nature of the VEN/BizPathways collaborative highlights an important feature of collaborative models: high transaction costs. Building trust among partners requires time together in partner meetings. Maintaining a shared vision and common purpose requires consistent and thorough communication among partners. These activities require a significant investment of time and resources to maintain the collaborative. The evolving nature of the VEN/BizPathways initiative suggests

recognition of these costs and an effort to create an alternative model that combines the advantages of collaboration with the efficiency of corporate leadership approach.

Entrepreneur-Focused. During interviews in 2002, the project partners articulated entrepreneur-focused outcomes for the project. The project should “help entrepreneurs in rural Minnesota” and create a “better resource for rural entrepreneurs” by “creating pathways to resources”. The content of BizPathways responds directly to observations from entrepreneurs, service providers and community leaders who participated in focus groups prior to the product launch. In the four pilot communities, participants identified the need for business education and planning tools to help entrepreneurs start their businesses. In addition, participants identified the need for networking opportunities, both for entrepreneurs and service providers.

In BizPathways, the project team has developed a robust electronic support system for entrepreneurs throughout Minnesota. The site has a wealth of business planning information that can help guide an entrepreneur, or potential entrepreneur, through the process of identifying and establishing a venture. In addition, the site provides links to service providers throughout the state and, for those who register, in local areas. BizPathways has experienced steadily increasing usage over time and is beginning to become established as an important component of the support infrastructure in the state.

BizPathways is designed as “a service for anyone interested in starting, growing, or supporting a small business in Minnesota”. The website can be used by service providers as a way of efficiently reaching more entrepreneurs, particularly those in more remote rural communities. However, its greatest benefit to entrepreneurs lies in its ability to bring disparate service provider resources together in a single place.

VEN/BizPathways effectively demonstrate these two elements of model practice – collaboration and entrepreneur focus. Even more telling, however, is that the successful establishment and use of the model has created interest in other states. A group of counties in northeastern North Dakota are contracting with Minnesota Rural Partners to provide a similar resource in that region. In 2004, replication efforts influenced by this project will be a powerful indicator of the innovative value of this initiative for addressing the needs of entrepreneurs and service providers, particularly those in rural areas.

ADDRESSING RURAL ISOLATION

One of the critical issues for entrepreneurs operating in rural parts of the country is isolation – from other entrepreneurs, from markets, from service providers. Some states have tried to address this issue by creating a decentralized service provider system. For example, North Carolina has Small Business Centers at all 58 community colleges throughout the state and 17 regional offices for the Small Business and Technology Development Centers. In Minnesota, technology is the tool for overcoming this isolation.

BizPathways works on two levels to overcome isolation. On one level, the website enables entrepreneurs anywhere in the state to have access to resources regardless of location. Through a single portal, an entrepreneur in Fosston can use the website to identify online resources on business planning including a link to the state Department of Commerce. On another level, entrepreneurs can access information and identify service providers in or near their place of business. The Fosston entrepreneur would be linked to the Women's Business Center in Fosston and could identify the educational programs that might meet her needs.

While these features address issues of isolation from service providers, it is less clear how well the resource helps connect entrepreneurs with one another. The website recently added online discussion groups for entrepreneurs who register with BizPathways. Actively facilitating this networking function may represent an area of opportunity for the project in the years ahead. It will be important to assess the performance and outcomes of these discussion groups as they develop some history and track record.

LACK OF SYSTEMIC INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND SUSTAINABILITY CONCERNS

The BizPathways initiative was the beneficiary of a TOP grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce in its start-up phase. This grant made the organization of the partnership, the initial community engagement and the development of the BizPathways resource possible. When the grant expires in 2004, however, there is no systemic institutional support for the program. As the lead partner, MRP faces its own funding challenges as federal support for the state rural development councils is drastically reduced.

Project partners identified the issue of resources and sustainability as significant during interviews in 2003. The core team is actively working to fundraise and consider alternative models for sustainability, including licensing to other states, user fees and identifying long-term core funding partners. It is less clear what role the state might play in more effectively using the BizPathway resource and, as a result, contributing resources to support the initiative. Fiscal constraints faced by most state governments make it difficult to consider new programs and activities. However, if the value of the BizPathways resource to entrepreneurs and both public and private sector service providers could be effectively demonstrated to state leaders, the potential may exist for renewing and expanding the partnership with the state.

Building systemic institutional support for entrepreneurship development initiatives is a critical step toward sustainability. One difficulty in building this support, particularly from the public sector, relates to the long-term and often incremental nature of entrepreneurship development programs. Growing businesses and changing community culture requires time, patience and a view to the long term rather than a short-term focus on single metrics such as the number of jobs created. Success for BizPathways and other entrepreneurship development initiatives will depend to a large

extent on the project team's ability to develop a set of outcome measures that can be used to describe the impact of BizPathways on traditional economic development measures such as business and job creation as well as other measures related to changes in the culture and capacity of communities to encourage entrepreneurship as a way of creating viable, sustainable rural communities.

POWER OF CIVIC ENTREPRENEURS

As with any entrepreneurial development program, a visionary and effective leadership team is critically important to VEN/BizPathways. A key element in the success to date of this project is the team that has evolved over time. The team is lead by extraordinary civic entrepreneurs. Civic or social entrepreneurs are described as “change agents” who engage in “a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning” and act “boldly without being limited to resources currently in hand”.³ This team has a history of working together and a chemistry that is positive and strong. The development and management approach adopted by the team reflected a set of values that encouraged collaboration, a non-hierarchical organizational structure and a very practical approach to problem solving.

At the heart of this team is Minnesota Rural Partners. As the collaborative partnership has evolved over the past several years, it has become more dependent upon the leadership and capacity of Minnesota Rural Partners. The challenge for MRP is to build a longer-term collaborative that ensures the project's success and sustainability while continuing to exercise the civic entrepreneurial leadership that has guided BizPathways successfully to date. In this, Minnesota is not alone. Most of the entrepreneurship development projects with which the Center has engaged are lead by civic entrepreneurs who have a unique capacity to recognize opportunities and marshal the resources to turn those opportunities into viable social ventures. One challenge for the BizPathways team and others is to develop a broader set of civic entrepreneurs across the state who can help expand BizPathways reach into more communities.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Just as all politics is local, all entrepreneurship development is ultimately about communities. As described in the TOP proposal, one purpose of this project was to “empower users in rural communities to move beyond passive information consumption to build a network of ‘communities of practice’ and increase access and capacity to participate in the new economy. Community engagement has been a component of the BizPathways initiative from the beginning. The project was piloted in four communities and the community cluster organizer conducted information sessions to increase awareness about the project. In addition, MRP has developed an entrepreneurial community champion training program for communities to learn how to support entrepreneurs, assess local resources and use BizPathways as a resource in their communities.

³ Gregory Dees, Jed Emerson, and Peter Economy, *Enterprising Nonprofits: A Toolkit for Social Entrepreneurs*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2001.

While community engagement has been important to the project from its inception, there is a sense that deeper community engagement is essential to the long-term success and sustainability of BizPathways. There was some sense expressed among the partners that the initiative was creating a more substantial dialogue across the state regarding community development and entrepreneurship. In fact, one of the initial outcomes expressed during the partner interviews was that this initiative would contribute to cultural change to support entrepreneurship in rural communities across the state. To achieve this objective, the community engagement strategy must continue to be refined and expanded as the project moves forward.

SECTION IV FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Often during discussions about encouraging rural entrepreneurs, the need for a web-based resource is identified. Entrepreneurs are looking for a “one stop shop” with resources and answers to the questions they face. Service providers are looking for a single web portal to connect entrepreneurs to resources. Community groups describe high-speed Internet access and the resources that infrastructure can provide as a solution for helping local businesses and entrepreneurs. Unfortunately the challenges to creating such systems are also apparently very high. Many initiatives have trouble creating a usable, working system of value to entrepreneurs. When those systems are created, they struggle to connect with entrepreneurs and service providers so that they can achieve some scale.

The BizPathways initiative has overcome these two hurdles. The project team has built a working system and the system has users. The BizPathways resource very much resembles an entrepreneurial start-up venture. Early-stage venture capital was provided by the U.S. Department of Commerce TOP grant and other sources. Significant in-kind capital was mobilized and invested as well. A prototype service was developed and rolled out for public view. Marketing and ongoing product development work is progressing. A highly dedicated and motivated entrepreneurial team has evolved from the initial project team. And, there appears to be growing interest in BizPathways within Minnesota and beyond.

The initiative, however, is not without challenges. One challenge relates to the continued development of the BizPathways resource – finding the BizPathways niche among all the service providers in the state. While the partners did not express major concern about product development issues, they did see the need to make sure the resource works for entrepreneurs and that it has value for them. The challenge is to ensure that BizPathways is more than an online directory. It should add value to the information by rationalizing it and providing an opportunity for entrepreneurs to engage in networking with both service providers and entrepreneurs across space. This issue of creating value added is particularly relevant in light of the small percent of visitors (3%) who are frequent visitors to the website (10 or more times in the past year).

While continuous product development and improvement can contribute to increased use by entrepreneurs, the project team must also work to engage both service providers and communities in the promotion and use of the resource. Service providers must be engaged as partners in BizPathways rather than as passive providers of information to the site. Their active participation is likely to depend to a great extent on the perceived value of the service to them. While value may be defined as more clients, it may also be possible to identify other outcomes of collaboration. For example, rationalizing the service provider system through the BizPathways resource may allow publicly funded service providers to advocate collectively for state resources. Through BizPathways, isolated service providers may be able to “give voice” to the importance of supporting local entrepreneurs.

One means for insuring that product development advances in line with the needs of both entrepreneurs and service providers is through the creation of user groups. Entrepreneur and service provider user groups could provide the feedback and insight to the project team as they consider how best to improve the BizPathways resource. These groups would be valuable resources to help identify ways in which the networking function of the site might be enhanced. And, these groups could help to identify value-added opportunities, particularly for service providers, that could help increase their engagement with and commitment to BizPathways.

In a similar vein, a significant commitment should be made to enhancing the community engagement strategy. Communities that go through the MRP training program might be recognized at the state level. Stories of communities that effectively use the BizPathways tool can be developed and used as encouragement to others to participate. Community advocates can help market the BizPathways resource to the entrepreneurs and service providers in their regions.

A major challenge facing the project team is neither technological nor market based – it is political. Without institutional partners who can provide significant capital resources, Minnesota Rural Partners faces a significant challenge as they attempt to take the BizPathways resource to scale. They need development and marketing capital to achieve deeper market penetration. They also need political endorsement from the state, higher education and other economic development players. Cultivating these institutional partners will require a commitment of time and resources, and the continued evaluation and sharing of the practice and promise of BizPathways.

NOTE ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship is conducting an ongoing evaluation of the VEN/BizPathways initiative. A number of interim documents have been produced since we began this process in 2001. This report is a summary of the insights we have developed on the project to date. For more information on specific aspects of VEN/BizPathways, please go to www.bizpathways.org or

www.minnesotaruralpartners.org. To view any of the interim documents, go to http://www.ruraleship.org/index_html?page=content/Minnesota.htm#Library and look for the following reports listed under VEN:

- 2002 Community Baseline Report
- 2003 Telecom Baseline Report
- 2003 BizPathways Users Baseline Report
- Analysis of BizPathways.org Website Statistics

APPENDIX A

LIST OF REPRESENTATIVES OF PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED IN 2002 AND 2003

Ann Treacy	Technical Consultant to VEN
Jane Leonard	Project Manager and Consultant to MRP
Kelly Peterson	Consultant to VEN and MRP
Michael Welcome	Northern Tier Initiative
Charles Shaffer	MN Department of Trade and Economic Development
Catherine Stine	Development Consultant to MRP (2002 only)
Doug Bechtold	IT Consultant to MRP (2003 only)
Christy James	Community Cluster Organizer
Mary Kruger	MN Department of Trade and Economic Development (2002 only)
Marcie McLaughlin	Executive Director, MRP (2002 only)
Tina Panitzke	Fiscal staff, MRP (2003 only)
Tara Crowley	Intern, MRP (2003 only)
Tom Kieffer	CEO and President of Agiliti

APPENDIX B

ANALYSIS OF BIZPATHWAYS.ORG WEBSITE STATISTICS

DISCUSSION

BizPathways.org gets a respectable amount of web traffic, currently averaging receiving 1,650 visitors per month. Although there is a small but loyal contingent of repeat visitors, 78% of the visitors during the last year did not return. BizPathways.org is a maturing website; it is now being indexed by the major search engines. The site is likely to see increased traffic from new users over the next several months as a result. This is an opportunity to re-visit content and strategies to engage visitors and encourage return visitors, keeping in mind that many of the new visitors from search engine results will not be from Minnesota or North Dakota.

A very high percent of visitors (27%) are dialing in through America Online. The BizPathways team may wish to examine their user base and explore possible enhancements or features for AOL users. BizPathways gets excellent referrals from with other websites. There are many websites that have a link to BizPathways.org and they are the kind of websites BizPathways should be proud to be named on. The BizPathways team could use this list to visit the referral sites and view each as a potential sponsor or partner.

Although there are currently 943 registered users (Ann Treacy, April 2004), the website feature that enables registered users to customize and save their information is not heavily used. In March 2004, the login page was viewed by 3% (67 of 2088) of the visitors for the month. It is not possible to know how many of the 67 visitors actually took the next step of logging in and registering on the system.

KEY FINDINGS

- Excluding spiders, web crawlers and network services, BizPathways.org received an average of 1,650 visitors per month over the last year. Visitors have increased over the past year to a high of 2,088 visitors in March 2004.
- 27% of visitor sessions to BizPathways.org during the last year were dialing in through America Online.
- There seems to be a correlation between Minnesota cities with active users and the pilot communities and locations of Christy James' community meetings.
- 22% of visitors to BizPathways.org visited more than once during the last year.
- BizPathways.org has a small percentage of visitors that visit frequently; 254 visitors (3% of visitors) visited 10 or more times during last year.
- 4% of the visitors access the login page at some point during their visit; the newly introduced Finance Avenue portion of the website receives 3% of the visitors.
- Visitors are most likely to visit BizPathways.org on Tuesdays and afternoons and stay for an average of 3 minutes 48 seconds.

- 52% of visitors during the last year followed a link from another website or search engine results.
- BizPathways has recently become indexed by the major search engines – Google and Yahoo; 21% of the visitors were referred by search engines in March 2004.
- Websites that have a link to BizPathways.org are called referrers; the top referrers to BizPathways.org over the last year, not including search engines, are:
 - www.sos.state.mn.us
 - www.smallbusinessexpo.org
 - www.minnesotaruralpartners.org
 - www.ndalliancelink.com
 - www.mnwfc.org
 - www.minnbankers.com
 - www.minneapolischamber.org
 - www.jjhill.org
 - http://rushford.govoffice.com
- The top search phrases that users typed into search engines and matched BizPathways.org over the last year are:
 - marketing plan outline
 - hiring laws
 - financial plan outline
 - bizpathways
 - go to my profile
 - technology plan outline
 - Minnesota entrepreneur
 - Minnesota entrepreneurs
 - Minnesota businesses