

How to Build a Neighborhood Skills Database

Synopsis

Compile a database of who has what practical skills in your neighborhood. You may be surprised at the talents your neighbors have, from general skills like carpentry and gardening to very specific skills like diesel engine repair and child psychology.

A skills database is a great way to start Transition in your community immediately, because it helps everyone access the resources that are right in their own neighborhood. It can help people buy, barter or donate services within the neighborhood, as well as be a resource for education, community projects, and establishing a local currency or community time bank.

Roles

If your community does not already have an organization involved in Transition, you can conduct a community inventory by forming an ad hoc committee:

Interviewers

Collect the information from neighbors

Data compilers

Compile the information into a useable format, like a categorized list or an electronic database

Database steward

Make the data available to neighbors in printed or online format, and coordinate updating of the data as needed

Time Frame: 1 to 2 months

Tools: Telephone, computer, word processing or database software

Project Outline

Process:

1. Develop a plan to inventory the skills of as many people as possible in your neighborhood. Key points you will need to establish first:
 - What are the boundaries of the neighborhood or area you will inventory?
 - What kinds of information do you want to include, and how will you categorize it?
 - In what manner will you make the information available to your neighborhood?

Your neighbors will want to know if you are publishing information online or just creating a printed directory for the neighborhood. Be sure to ask permission as needed.

2. Look for collaborators. Are there any groups you can partner with to research, develop and promote the database? (For example, community organizations, neighborhood associations, local newsletters, etc.)
3. There are many ways you can collect skills information, such as holding neighborhood potlucks, posting flyers at local gathering places, and simply going door-to-door.

When you collect information from your neighbors, be sure to get each person's full contact details and ask their permission to be contacted for advice or instruction concerning their area of skill.

One fun way to collect information at a neighborhood gathering is to have a very large-scale map of your neighborhood displayed on which people can write their skills occupation right in the spot where they live.

Gathering an Inventory of Skills:

We've suggested a structure and questions for your research, but ultimately you should use a structure that makes the most sense to your group. The level of detail of your research will depend on the resources of your group and the scope you set in your research plan.

4. You may want to track down specific skills that would be particularly useful for Transition efforts. For example, food production skills, like organic gardening, tree pruning, animal husbandry, and saving seed.
5. Traditional manufacturing skills, like metalworking, woodworking, pottery, weaving, knitting, and sewing.
6. Organizational and communication skills, like meeting facilitation, project management, community organizing, lobbying, and media relations.
7. Finally, after you've collected all the information you need and have compiled it into a useful format for people to use, promote the resource regularly to your neighbors, and find ways to update it and to keep track of how people make use of it.

Resources

- *Community Asset Mapping:*
Tools, publications and other resources available from the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at <http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html>.
- *Sample Community Inventories:*
The City of Berkeley, California developed an in-depth, comprehensive inventory focused on sustainability, available online at: <http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/sustainable/community/sustainableberkeley.html>
- *Local Business:*
See Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, <http://www.livingeconomies.org>.
- *Time Banking:*
Resources and online tracking tool available from TimeBanks USA at <http://www.timebanks.org>.

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Acknowledgements

Content for this How To guide provided by Post Carbon Institute (www.postcarbon.org).

