Networking Israeli Science

It does seem ironic. Despite its unparalleled reputation in the Computer Sciences, Israel has no comprehensive, consistently updated computerized database, or network for its own R&D community. The latest attempt at this elusive goal, the Israeli National Database on Academic R&D (INDARD), developed powerful search software to support such a venture in style, but the input was incomplete. Despite its high technical caliber and the sponsorship of university Research Authorities, INDARD encountered the same problem as its predecessors: lack of motivation. Individual scientists had little incentive to participate, so they didn't.

Prof. Paul Fuhrman, Professor of Mathematics and Computing at Ben-Gurion University and a member of the Israel Science Foundation Board and Naomi Gal, Head of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities Department of Computing, Communications and Information, are spearheading an innovative Israel Academy initiative which seeks to facilitate electronic grant applications to Israel's many competitive science grants programs (the ISF, BSF, GIF, BARD, etc.). This will involve creating a shared pool of commonly used information, protected by sophisticated security measures, for electronically submitted proposals.

The new system, once developed and adopted, will greatly streamline and speed the submissions of Israeli researchers. They now submit 15 or more paper copies of each 15-30 page proposal. Furthermore, the electronic CVs and publication lists that are a standard part of all such submissions will assist in forming a large, useful academic database. Scientists competing for grants will have every incentive to keep their CV's, addresses and publication lists up to date. Finally, the database and a standardized "keyword" or topic list can be used in a user-friendly system that can help link Israeli and foreign investigators in the same fields at the click of a query button. The response to this initiative from both the funding and researcher communities has been very positive.

Gal would go further. "Israeli science is highly international, and we need to link our system to the outside world. The easiest way to do this is to join the Community of Science (COS). COS already has a highly interactive network involving over 800 universities and 500,000 scientists. " Although most entries are American, there are increasing numbers of entries from foreign member countries (35,000 Chinese entries were just added). COS can do extensive searches using a four-level standardized scientific vocabulary and/or geographical location, and its CVs and publication lists can be updated by the investigator himself, with appropriate security safeguards. As an additional incentive, COS provides invaluable real-time information on new funding opportunities, an excellent online U.S. science policy news service and many other useful tools.

Fuhrman, Gal and Shula Bonjack of the ISF visited COS in Baltimore, MD, in September and came away impressed. "The estimated $50,000 annual dues would connect every Israeli scientist to the international network, provide them full services, and cost us less than reinventing their interactive CV/publications software alone," says Prof. Fuhrman. "The U.S. National Science Foundation and many European foundations already use electronic grants submissions, and we can learn a lot from their experiences. It's time to combine our granting agencies, COS and the INDARD concept into a single system that can provide Israeli scientists the domestic and international networking services they deserve."