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ONLINE DATABASES

Searching on the Run

By Carol Tenopir

WITH WIRELESS CONNECTIVITY and small laptop computers, we are no longer tied to the desktop for online searching. Handheld personal digital assistants (PDAs) offer even greater portability. So far, the most common uses of PDAs are as calendars and address books, or to interface with a laptop or desktop machine. More advanced PDAs, like Research in Motion's BlackBerry Wireless Handheld™, as well as new versions of the Palm PC, add email, paging, a telephone, and limited Internet surfing.

Hard-to-read screen displays and small keyboards (or no keyboard) have been a barrier to using PDAs for online searching and reading. As the technology improves (and as people get accustomed to doing everything digitally and on the run), PDAs may become the hot device for accessing databases and electronic publications. Already there are reports of BlackBerry addiction.

LexisNexis

LexisNexis is one of the first to offer online services to BlackBerry users. Those whose companies subscribe to LexisNexis (LN) Publisher can get current news on a limited set of predefined topics delivered directly to their BlackBerry. LN Publisher "pushes" targeted information to a company's web site, portal, or intranet. The company administrator of LN Publisher (such as the corporate librarian) sets up the topical profiles and determines to whom incoming stories are delivered. Users see a similar display as they would on their desktops, at no extra charge.

BlackBerry users can also search more than 14,000 sources in the LexisNexis database (for an add-on fee). This is a special interface and simplified search tool especially designed for the PDA market. LexisNexis services don't run on other PDAs, and even BlackBerrys must be Java-enabled, have BlackBerry Enterprise Server version 3.5 or higher, and be Mobile Data Service enabled.

Physicians and PDAs

Doctors are early adopters of PDAs, with an estimated 35–50 percent of physicians (and 80 percent of U.S. medical students) currently using them. These users are most likely to be male, in an urban community, and in training or a recent medical school graduate. They are less concerned about small screen size than memory limitations. The most common uses are for drug reference, personal scheduling, and medical calculations. I recently surveyed members of the American Academy of Pediatrics and found that about half of the respondents use a PDA—mostly for personal use. Hardly any use their PDA to download articles, but over a quarter of respondents indicated they would "definitely or probably" use a PDA in the future to search and access articles. PDAs

loading. In addition to journal searching, Ovid PDA users have access to drug information through several sources and to disease information, including etiology, symptoms, and diagnostics.

Elsevier recently launched the POCKET Consult platform for Palm OS or Pocket PC users. Physicians who have access to MD Consult can set up a POCKET Consult account to access various Elsevier medical titles and services on their PDA. They can download information that will be used frequently, including selected medical e-books on a title-by-title basis, or tables of contents and abstracts from Elsevier journals. Some information is updated automatically or allows interactive searching.

Access to PubMed from PDAs is being tested by NLM's PubMed On Tap project, which works with Palm OS or

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are particularly suited to fact checking in structured information sources, such as drug or disease handbooks.

Capturing the physician market

Information providers that serve the medical market are aggressively developing special search options for PDAs. Ovid, Elsevier, and the National Library of Medicine (NLM) are all targeting the medical end user on the run. Others, such as Thompson's Westlaw, offer wireless access to special content.

Ovid@Hand works with Palm or Pocket PC handhelds. Customers with access to Ovid's full-text Journals@Ovid can browse through tables of contents, mark articles of interest, and have them delivered to their PDA when they "sync" to the MyLibrary feature of the Ovid online system. Updated table of contents for selected journals are sent automatically, and searches can also be formulated on the PDA for later up-

Pocket PC PDAs with wireless connections. Users can do simplified searching of Medline, save or email retrieved citations, and link out to full-text articles. NLM seeks feedback on the development of PubMed on Tap through its web site (archive.nlm.nih.gov/proj/pmot/pmot.php)

Future users

If you are a medical librarian, many of your constituents may already be accessing information through their PDAs. Businesspeople are right behind. Since early adopters tend to be recent graduates and those who need their information wherever and whenever, it may not be long before students, faculty, and other researchers look for high-quality information on their PDAs.

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