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Carol Tenopir
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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Recommended Citation

Tenopir, Carol, "Are You a Super Searcher?" (2000). *School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works*.

https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_infosciepubs/209

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LJ INFOTECH

□ ONLINE DATABASES □

BY CAROL TENOPIR

Are You a Super Searcher?

MILLIONS OF PEOPLE around the world consider themselves to be good online searchers, and probably hundreds of thousands of them rate themselves as experts. College librarians and professors notice that a growing number of undergraduates and graduate students feel confident in their online abilities. Everyone who works in a library knows at least the library's online catalog system and probably many other online, CD-ROM, and web search systems. If everyone is above average, as in Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, what makes an online searcher stand out?

One way to identify such characteristics is to go to the mother of all super searchers herself, Reva Basch. Basch, an information broker, prolific author, and expert online searcher for more than 20 years, has edited the "Super Searchers" series of books since 1993 and has written several volumes (*Secrets of the Super Searchers: The Accumulated Wisdom of 23 of the World's Top Online Searchers*, Eight Bit Books, dist. by CyberAge Bks., 1993; *Secrets of the Super Net Searchers: The Reflections, Revelations, and Hard-Won Wisdom of 35 of the World's Top Internet Researchers*, Pemberton Pr., dist. by CyberAge Bks., 1996). Through in-depth interviews with expert information professionals, the books help readers learn the secrets of the best online searchers.

What makes a super searcher?

I asked Basch what makes someone a super searcher? If forced to boil it down, she says, "The thrill of the hunt—in other words, the sheer enjoyment of finding the answer, whatever it takes." Basch has found that super searchers "re-

ally love the research process. Curiosity plays into that sense of enjoyment, of course. So does creativity—the ability to look at a problem from various angles, to approach it from directions other than the obvious one."

Mary Ellen Bates, author of *Super Searchers Do Business: The Online Secrets of Top Business Researchers*, CyberAge Bks., 1999—a book in Basch's series—found that the business information experts she interviewed all share a well-developed sense of creative curiosity. In fact, Bates says, "Several searchers described themselves as excitement junkies—they like using their creativity and enjoy the challenge of seeing if they really can find exactly the information needed by the client within the budget and time frame allowed."

When I teach reference classes, I see this curiosity in the eyes of some new students. Usually these are the students my colleagues and I see in future reference and online searching classes. Emerging super searchers can't get online enough. They ask friends, family, and fellow students if they need help finding information. They will seek out every opportunity to practice, to try new online systems, and to explore different databases.

Super searchers: born or made?

Basch believes that "some people are born to search." The challenge for all of us, of course, is to attract those born searchers into librarianship, to let them know there is a field where their natural talents are appreciated and will be cultivated.

If it is fundamental curiosity that makes the best searchers stand out, how much can teachers or mentors help them? Basch thinks a broad education plus experience turns born searchers into super searchers. The best searchers need "a thorough grounding in research methodology—print reference works, professional database services, and the net—in order to make strategically sound decisions, to research effectively and efficiently."

Expert searchers need education in traditional reference skills, including the reference interview, identifying the concepts in each question and their relative importance to the person with the information need, and deciding which resources to use.

Bates found that searchers invariably mentioned the interview process (whether it's called "user needs analysis," "reference interview," "client wishlist," or whatever) as one of the most important parts of research. "This is often how they determine which information sources to use, how much time and budget to allocate to the project, and what additional analysis to provide," she says.

The reference interview today may be done over the telephone or via e-mail, although face-to-face contact for really tough questions remains preferred. This hasn't changed with the method of information gathering—good communication between the requestor and the librarian leads to better results.

Not just the web

All schools of library and information science still offer training in commercial online searching and require knowledge of print sources, in addition to substantial Internet experience. Each year more students question why these old-fashioned sources are necessary. Super searchers know that no one medium can yet answer every facet of every question.

In a recent article ("The Making of a Super Searcher," *Searcher*, Nov./Dec. 1999, p. 33–35), Bates emphasized that super searchers need expertise in both web and traditional online searching. The best bear "the scars of having put in time in the online trenches, preferably on one of the Big Three: Dialog, Dow Jones Interactive, or LEXIS-NEXIS. That usually means several years of searching on one professional online service—enough time not only to have learned the basics of content and functionality, but also to have mastered a good sense of the advanced features to expect in an online service."



Carol Tenopir (tenopir@utkux.utk.ed) is Professor at the School of Library and Information Science, University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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It takes education plus time to feel comfortable with a variety of information sources and learn which is likely to yield the best answer in the least amount of time. Bates's business super searchers agreed that "the net offers new information sources; it does not supplant the traditional ones."

Super searchers need to know when to turn to the free web first, when to go to more formal online or CD-ROM sources, and when to turn first to print (and when to check all possibilities). Super searchers feel comfortable with the web and regularly use a variety of search engines, search directories, and, especially, reliable web sites.

Convincing your clients

In this age when nearly everyone equates research with web searching, however, searchers often must justify to their patrons why they recommend looking anywhere beyond the web and must emphasize the importance of evaluating web content. Bates found that business super searchers must "continually remind their clients, patrons, and colleagues to think critically about what's on the net."

Super legal searchers feel the same responsibility. T.R. Halvorson, author of the latest "Super Searcher" volume (*Law of the Super Searchers: The Online Secrets of Top Legal Researchers*, CyberAge Bks., 2000) found that expert legal searchers "continually combat the notion that information on the Internet is free," while taking "a tempered view of the 'free' Internet."

They most often rely on the commercial online services of Lexis-Nexis and Westlaw because they frequently need value-added features such as significant backfiles, multfile searching, consistent formats, the capacity to search by fields or document type, and high-precision search features. Super legal searchers don't hesitate to use free Internet resources "where they shine." These experts know that the web is the best place to find, for example, government documents, U.S. federal legislation, Canadian legal information, company statements, and international news.

Boolean and beyond

Super searchers typically are well versed in Boolean logic and make traditional Boolean logic systems work for them. The search features that on

many Internet search engines are called "advanced" (those that allow, for example, Boolean AND, OR, and, maybe, NOT plus truncation and proximity) are considered basic tools by good searchers.

Super searchers, however, know when Boolean will work best and when to rely on other features such as relevance ranking, natural language, and other statistical or linguistic alternatives. Halvorson finds that legal experts

Librarians of every type—in every type of library—should cultivate super searcher skills

"are gaining appreciation for natural language and relevance ranking," such as those available on Lexis-Nexis Free-style, Westlaw Is Natural, and most Internet search engines. Such features "help overcome the problem of too many hits when searching broad topics or using general keywords" and are especially good when the searcher isn't sure how to start a search on a fuzzy topic.

Basch also recognizes that search software is improving. She points out that "the more sophisticated natural language algorithms already account for synonyms, plurals, and alternate word forms, context, and shades of meaning" and that software that will replicate the reference interview is surely coming. When I asked if she thought better software would ever replace expert searchers, she replied, "But who writes those algorithms? Who designs the interfaces that walk the user through a reference interview? Super searchers, of course. I don't think we'll ever be entirely replaced by software."

Are there jobs?

End users often don't mind less-than-perfect searches, so I wonder if employers still value good searching skills. When I asked Basch this question she laughed, "Did they ever?"

A large part of librarians' jobs these days is setting up friendlier inter-

faces to a variety of electronic resources and negotiating flat-fee licensing agreements that allow end users to search dozens or even hundreds of resources through the library's web site. There is a down side to such better service, says Basch. "Our end users will no longer recognize good search results when they see them. Many of them are unconsciously settling for good enough." In addition, expert searchers "have fewer opportunities to demonstrate how cost-effectively we can retrieve precise, targeted results."

Still, jobs for expert searchers are available, Basch says, "now more than ever—in company information centers, in independent entrepreneurial research settings, in information-intensive institutions, businesses, and corporate divisions and departments of all sorts."

Librarians of every type—working in school, public, academic, and special libraries—should cultivate super searcher skills. Even if they never serve as intermediaries, librarians need to troubleshoot on a variety of online systems; negotiate licenses and choose good software; and help their users choose among formats, evaluate results, and improve their search strategies.

How super searchers can help

Also, there are opportunities for super searchers to help develop better systems. Basch says, "We can all agree that search engines could benefit from more input from people with real-life research expertise—and in designing taxonomies for both general and specialized subject catalogs on the web."

A librarian's job may be to work with end users, serve as an intermediary, negotiate site licenses, set up the library's web page, or build better software. Becoming a super searcher can help with any of these tasks—and reading about the super searchers in the books mentioned here will bring the insights gleaned from their years of experience to every searcher.

Note: Forthcoming books in 2000 and beyond in the "Super Searchers" series include Amelia Kassel on investment searching, Susan Detwiler on medical super searchers, Paula Hane on media and journalism researchers, Grace Villamora on advertising and marketing researchers, and Jan Tudor on mergers and acquisitions searchers. Basch (reva@well.com) says she is actively looking for additional titles.