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Learning from the Experts

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Abstract:
Online searching is often learned in school or through a brief workshop. However, two recent books on online searching can provide one with close to an expert training. Reva Basch's 'Secrets of the Super Searchers' and Mary Ellen Bates' 'The Online Deskbook' are two worthy releases on the subject.

Full Text:
IN THE OLDEN DAYS, skills often were learned in an apprenticeship. The master artisan passed on to an apprentice everything he or she knew. The apprentice learned by observing, practicing, and assimilating the skills until expert and confident enough to go it alone. Such training wasn't an organized process but a trial-and-error experience. The blacksmith didn't enter a lecture hall or use a lab workbook; he fashioned the horseshoes while the apprentice watched, asked questions, and assisted.

Perhaps online searching should be learned like that--watching, assisting, and being corrected by a master searcher. But few of us can afford years of apprenticeship. After learning online searching in school or via a brief workshop, you may be out there searching as best as you can and, often, teaching others. Protracted learning from experts is a luxury few can afford.

However, the wisdom of master online craftspeople is not totally beyond reach. Several books from Pemberton Press (Online Inc.) pass on the accumulated wisdom of many expert searchers and let us all learn better searching techniques from the mouths of masters.

Super searcher secrets

Secrets of the Super Searchers (Reva Basch, ed., Eight Bit Bks. [now Pemberton], 1993) may be familiar, but its tips on how to better search commercial online systems are not out-of-date. Subtitled "The Accumulated Wisdom of 23 of the World's Top Online Searchers," this book includes personal tips from many people whose names may be familiar from conference presentations or articles in the professional literature. The experts are public, special, academic, and school librarians or self-employed researchers.

This is not a manual on how to maneuver through the commands and pitfalls of specific online systems. Each chapter consists of a free-form interview with one supersearcher. Although editor Basch ends each chapter with a summary of "secrets" extracted from that interview, each interview has a stream-of-consciousness feel, as if you had an hour or two to just sit and listen at the feet of the expert. The questions asked and the flow of the answers vary from chapter to chapter, making the book fun to read and absorb in your spare time, but it is not something to use when you are in the middle of a high-cost online search.

Basch is just as likely to ask "What do you love about searching?" as "What kinds of reference tools do you use?" To the former question, independent researcher Marydee Ojala answered, "The thrill of unearthing something the client thought didn't exist" and "creating linkages between data elements the way I want, rather than the way a print publisher decided I wanted it." Sherry Willhite, then information services librarian at UC-San Diego, likes "being able to play with a computer and make it do things it wasn't designed to do." To the latter question, corporate information specialist Anne Mintz, director, information services at Forbes, Inc., said she frequently uses a database directory, DIALOG bluesheets, and Full-text Sources Online.

Common themes

Although most interviews reveal personal wisdom, some common themes or threads emerge. Basch summarizes these in her introduction and points out specific examples at the end of each chapter. The expert searchers (and this author) agree on several important concepts, including:

* Online is not the only answer. Many questions can be answered better with a printed resource or via the telephone.

* Everyone has a favorite system--often the one they learned first. A searcher should use another system when it has content that is unavailable elsewhere or special features (such as ranking or sorting output) needed for a particular search, not just because the system may be cheaper.

* Experienced searchers are always ready with alternative search terms and strategies. In Basch's words, "they maintain a `what if' mindset and they `go with the flow.'" Everything that will happen in a search can't be planned beforehand, but anticipating problems before they happen saves online dollars.

* It helps to have a good vocabulary. Controlled vocabulary descriptors are important, especially in science and technology databases, but thinking of synonyms and other alternatives is the mark of a good searcher.

* Always question a zero hits result. Finding nothing usually doesn't mean there is no information on a topic; it could be due to errors in the databases or in search strategy, or choosing the wrong database. Experienced searchers consider all of these possibilities when the results don't live up to expectations.

* The most important part of an online search is the search interview. In a mediated search environment, discovering what your client really wants is crucial to your finding it. Although Basch's book doesn't focus on end user searching, when you help end users, it's good to push them to think about what they seek and what they expect to find.

Internet super searcher secrets

Just a year or so after Super Searchers was published, the number of end user searchers exploded with the growth of the World Wide Web. Many experienced intermediary searchers added the web's new resources and new techniques to their search skills, and librarians found themselves teaching many more end users to search.

So Basch put on her interview hat again to tap Internet experts. Basch's Secrets of the Super Net Searchers (Professional Reading, LJ 2/1/97) follows the same pattern as the earlier book. This time the book is subtitled "The Reflections, Revelations, and Hard-Won Wisdom of 35 of the World's Top Internet Researchers." We listen to and learn from nine independent research professionals, ten academic librarians and educators, seven corporate researchers and webmasters, and nine "writers, consultants, and net pioneers."

Super Net Searchers follows the same nonlinear interview style. Basch's only attempts to turn it into a more traditional reference book are the glossary index, and list of Internet sources at the back. Otherwise, you can pick a chapter at random and read whatever seems interesting. (It sounds like the web already.)

As in the earlier book, Basch examines common threads in her introduction. This helps to tie the disparate personal voices together and shows the reader what can be learned from the book, including:

* The real strength of the Internet is that it allows global access to materials and people heretofore unaccessible.

* A reference interview is the most important first step. (Sound familiar?) A good interview means the difference between really searching and just surfing. These experts even recommend a self-interview before you search. According to Basch, "Before you embark on a serious research project, you must have a clear sense of what you're trying to accomplish. If you don't, the temptation to follow every 'interesting' lead, as opposed to the truly promising ones, will overwhelm you."

* Use more than one web search engine and look for the advanced features. Search engines differ in what parts of the web they index and what relevance algorithms they use. Often what is labeled as advanced are the standard features experienced searchers expect: truncation, Boolean logic, proximity operators, field specification, etc.

* Start with web directories, catalogs, or best source sites. Netscape's "Net Directory" button will take you to many categorized or pre-filtered web sites. This should be more efficient than a blind search through millions of sites. Better yet, for a "few good ones" search, go to sites where subject experts have gathered pointers to the best on the web.

* It may take longer (and therefore cost more of your time) to search the Internet than to search an organized, traditional online system. Despite the hype, not everything is on the net. Traditional online, CD-ROM, the telephone, and print remain im-portant tools.

* Bring critical skills to bear on the quality of the information found on the net (and any resources used). One of the information professional's most important skills may be skepticism, or at least caution, about the information retrieved.

Also, an online deskbook

If you like a more linear and formal approach to learning how to search, Mary Ellen Bates's The Online Deskbook (Pemberton, 1996) may be just the thing. Bates shares her knowledge of specific online systems in this book, which is part directory, part system-specific manual, and part expert search tips. (Bates is interviewed in Secrets of the Super Net Searchers, and Basch has written the foreword to this book.)

Unlike the Secrets books, The Online Deskbook might be propped up next to your computer while you search. Chapters are arranged by system and include capsule descriptions of what is needed to start searching on each.

The Deskbook includes chapters on selected professional online services (DataStar, DataTimes, DIALOG, Dow Jones

News/Retrieval, LEXIS-NEXIS and NewsNet) and general online services (America Online, CompuServe, Microsoft Network, Prodigy, and the Internet). Each chapter is organized consistently, including contact information, general description, overview of resources, finding aids, common commands, getting connected, power tools, pricing, other features, and evaluation. This is, indeed, a book for linear thinkers! Factual information will go out of date, so the author should have to update this fairly frequently.

Sharing wisdom

Bates shares her wisdom in each chapter's concluding "evaluation." These evaluations reveal an expert's intimate familiarity as she shares what she most likes and dislikes. For example, for DIALOG, Bates likes its many powerful search tools, its good set-building capabilities, and its EXPAND command that reveals word variations and misspellings. She dislikes its less-than-friendly interface and its inconsistencies regarding free formats across databases. For the Internet, she likes its culture, its exponential growth, and its capacity to further communication with people worldwide. She dislikes its inefficient "high noise-to-signal" ratio, its lack of standardization, and its susceptability to fads.

General chapters on "choosing the right database," "getting the most from your search dollar," and "where to get more information" link the specific system chapters. Although Bates reminds us that we can't rely on any one online system, a primary (or "home") online system should be the one that has the sources you most likely need, charges costs you can anticipate, provides training and support, and ha] a structure that makes sense to you.

Saving money doesn't just mean picking the cheapest system. It means planning a search before you go online, keeping up on system enhancements or changes, thinking creatively about the search terms you use and the databases you select, checking prices before you log on, and stopping when you have enough. Bates's supersearcher status comes through in her practical advice.

All three books show that good online searching is a mix of ideas learned in formal, classroom settings; skills learned through extensive on-the-job practice; and ideas shared with other searchers. Sitting at the virtual feet of dozens of searching experts may be the closest thing to an apprenticeship in this modern age.

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