



10-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Tenopir, Carol, "Database Searching On a Budget" (1989). *School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works*.
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_infosciepubs/312

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ONLINE DATABASES

BY CAROL TENOPIR

Database Searching on a Budget

(Based on a presentation for the New Mexico Library Association Annual Meeting, April 1989.)

FEW LIBRARIES have unlimited resources for database searching (or for anything else). Some librarians have been hesitant to offer a full range of end user and intermediary search services. There are, however, several relatively low-cost options for database searching that allow even small libraries to offer searching without a big up-front or ongoing investment.

Instructional accounts

If you are in a school or academic library and you are willing to offer a course in database searching or to incorporate database instruction into your BI program, your students may be eligible to use the instructional accounts offered by all of the major online systems. Originally intended for graduate schools of library and information science (and still used extensively by them), many of the online system's instructional accounts are now available to anyone offering a formal online instruction program.

Instructional accounts offer substantial savings on most of the databases offered by the full systems. Students in a search course can access Magazine Index on DIALOG for \$15 per hour. Regular use of Magazine Index is \$90 per hour plus telecommunications cost and a per record charge. For training and practice most of us can't afford the full rate, but we may be able to budget \$15 per hour per student. The modest cost can be absorbed, passed on to the students with lab fees, or billed to an

academic department.

There are clear restrictions to these accounts, and you must make sure you are following the contract provisions; these low rates are only for students learning to search in a supervised setting or for you demonstrating searches. A nice side benefit is that enrollment may go up in library instruction courses as the word gets around or as students reenroll in order to get access to databases!

Full-command versions of systems may be too difficult for infrequent end users, so Dialog and BRS both target schools with special versions of their classroom instruction accounts. Dialog's CLASSMATE, for example, offers an easy-to-use command or menu version of DIALOG with about one-fifth the number of databases. CLASSMATE can be used as low as fifth or sixth grade on up through college. Workbooks, teacher aids, a videotape, and a seminar are all available to help the instructor. BRS offers a menu-driven interface for instructional accounts.

Odd hours searching

The instruction option doesn't help most public or special libraries or those that want to offer intermediary search services. These libraries may want to take advantage of the so-called after hours services that offer lower hourly rates but are available only on evenings and weekends.

BRS/After Dark and Dialog's Knowledge Index were originally targeted to home computer users and are widely used by academic libraries for end user search services. Clever librarians are using them as well for budget-priced intermediary search services (Melvon Ankeny, "Mediated Searching on End-User Systems: An Inexpensive Online Resource," *RQ*, Summer 1989, p. 506-516).

There are some trade-offs when using the after hours services (in addition to the limited hours). Each service offers only a portion of the databases available on the full system (70

of Dialog's 330 on Knowledge Index and 100 of BRS's 200 on After Dark), but these databases tend to be those most used in public, academic, and school libraries. The search interfaces are simplified (Knowledge Index and CLASSMATE use the same software; After Dark is the menu interface also available for instruction), and not all of the sophisticated features of the full systems are available after hours. Searching in the evenings or on weekends may impact on your staffing.

Still, the substantial cost savings of these services make them very attractive. On BRS, the pay-as-you-go price for Books in Print is \$65 plus telecommunications, ERIC is \$25, Sport is \$67. On After Dark these same three databases are \$16, \$8, and \$17, respectively, with no telecommunications charges. Knowledge Index offers equally impressive savings.

Fixed-fee searching

Both of the options so far charge on a per hour basis, making it difficult to predict the cost of any one search or of a search service. Another option is to select a system that charges per search rather than per hour, making it easier for libraries to set a fee or to budget for online searching.

Wilson offers a low-cost, fixed-fee option with their WILSEARCH interface to the WILSONLINE system. WILSEARCH is a microcomputer software package that is easy enough to be used by end users and is inexpensive because it minimizes time online. Searches are formulated offline with the help of the WILSEARCH software. The system then logs on to WILSONLINE, executes the stored search, downloads up to ten citations, and logs off. Searches are defined as up to ten citations with a cost of from \$1 to \$5, depending on your up-front commitment. WILSEARCH is especially good for schools and public libraries and is definitely a low-cost option (if you already have a PC and modem).



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Another low-cost, fixed-fee option is the EasyNet gateway service. EasyNet also defines a search as up to ten citations, with a charge of between \$5.50 and \$7.50 per search. Libraries can get single-session passwords to help control security in end user search services.

With EasyNet, the user must dial the EasyNet system that then takes over the search formulation by asking the user a series of questions. The system will determine which database to access on any one of 13 major online systems (or experienced users can select a database), log on, execute the search, download up to ten citations, and log off. An online SOS service allows the user to enter questions about the search that will be answered by professional searchers at the EasyNet headquarters.

EasyNet and WILSEARCH are low-cost options for even infrequent searchers. Other fixed-fee services need high-volume use before a savings is made. BRS/After Dark, for example, offers unlimited online time for a yearly fee of approximately \$15,000; EasyNet offers a year of searching via its Answer Machine for between \$20,000 to \$50,000, depending on how many databases are included. Clearly these options are beyond the budget of many libraries, but may be a cost-effective alternative for large-scale end user search operations.

Alternative databases

If your patrons are more interested in current events or in information for personal use and needs rather than for research purposes, then the low-cost, lower-power consumer information systems may be appropriate. A system such as CompuServe can be a way to start database searching in your library.

CompuServe includes such useful sources as Consumer Reports, newsletters, newswires, demographic information, hardware and software reviews, and business information. It also has lots you won't use as much in the library (e.g., home shopping, bulletin boards, games), but the variety of information is staggering. (The Source, CompuServe's most direct competition, was purchased by CompuServe and absorbed in July 1989.)

CompuServe costs \$12.75 per hour at 1200 or 2400 baud with a \$1.50 per month minimum and surcharges for some databases. Help and tutorials are free. Searching is simple without

the sophisticated capabilities (or necessary learning curve) of the online systems such as DIALOG or BRS.

Many areas also have local database systems that can be accessed online by the library for very low costs (or for free). Several states offer legislative tracking systems, career information, emergency social services, or other such databases to the public, but only a small percent of the population has the equipment and know-how to access these. Libraries increase their visibility when they push themselves as the center to access this information; also, they may be able to prove the value of database access, fund hardware, and generate interest in the community for extended services.

Bringing databases in-house

The options discussed so far are all online and are reliant on the phone system, communications software, and a modem. Just to dial the nearest telecommunications node can add to the expense in some rural areas and unreliable local phone systems can be a problem. The final option gets around the telecommunications problems by making the databases part of the library collection.

The most popular way to do this now is by databases on CD-ROM. CD-ROM can't be called a low-cost option for small libraries because the up-front and (sometimes) ongoing subscription costs can be high. Subscriptions to indexes/abstracts mostly run \$1000 per year and up, while a one-time purchase of something like an encyclopedia generally runs \$300 and up. CD-ROM players sell for \$500-\$800.

What CD-ROM can be is cost effective, because, unlike online searching, the more you search, the lower the cost per use. It can also be a lower-cost alternative for high-volume users of a single database when the online charges incurred for a database would exceed the cost of the CD equivalent. (If you search one hour per week on ERIC on Knowledge Index [\$24/hour], you will exceed the cost of a yearly subscription to Dialog's Ondisc ERIC.) Some one-time purchase CD-ROMs might let you get started with CD-ROM services (e.g., the Electronic Encyclopedia from Grolier for \$400 or Micro-Soft Bookshelf for under \$300).

Another way to bring databases in-house is to create or download records on a subject of particular interest to your patrons and make them

available with appropriate database searching software on your micro-computer. This is a big topic itself. For more information, see "Searching Full-Text Databases," *LJ*, May 1, 1988, p. 60-61.

The impact on the library

With the many lower-cost alternatives and a creative way of looking at the situation, there is no reason why every library can't offer some level of database searching. The impact on your staff and library will depend on the option you select, whether you are adding new database services or starting from scratch, and whether you are seeking to demonstrate the value of searching with hopes for expansion or if you want to stay with the option selected originally. Even inexpensive options require staff time to learn—finding creative financing, finding space for equipment—and may dilute resources and energy.

On the positive side, expanding your database search options can be used for good public relations, offers a chance to bring new constituents to the library, offers you a chance to enhance your teaching role in an exciting way, and allows a greater number of librarians and patrons to find information that cannot be easily found by manual means.

Contact addresses

DIALOG Information Svcs.
(also for Knowledge Index)
3460 Hillview Ave.
Palo Alto, CA 94304
800-3-DIALOG

BRS Information Technologies
(also for After Dark)
1200 Route 7
Latham, NY 12110
800-468-0908

H.W. Wilson Co.
(for WILSEARCH and WILSONLINE)
950 University Ave.
Bronx, NY 10452
212-588-8400

EasyNet
Telebase Systems, Inc.
763 W. Lancaster Ave.
Bryn Mawr, PA 19010
215-526-2800

CompuServe Information Svcs.
PO Box 20212
5000 Arlington Ctr. Blvd.
Columbus, OH 43220
800-848-8199

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