

did you know?

innovations
insert

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Using the Internet to Find Current & Best Practices

If you've used the Internet to find information, you know it's a powerful research tool. Whether you're looking for a product review, magazine article, software tutorial, or how-to guide, the Internet can be the quick and easy way to find what you need.

When your organization has a business problem, learning how other groups have dealt with similar situations can help you figure out how to handle yours. This is where another powerful tool—current and best practices research—is beneficial.

Here we'll show you how to combine these tools and use the Internet to conduct current and best practices research.

Covering the Basics

Current practices research is an organized attempt to learn from the experiences of others. Any problem, no matter how complex, is likely to have occurred elsewhere. Identifying and evaluating the solutions developed by others can help determine what works, and what doesn't, in the earliest stages of project development.

The next step is to zero in on effective or so-called *best practices* that shed more light onto the characteristics that led to success. But don't completely disregard the less-than-successful stories. They have as much, or more, to teach as the ones with happy endings.

Conducting current and best practices research is critical to developing a full understanding of a problem and all of its components. The time you spend searching, reading, and talking to people who have dealt with similar problems will only improve your project.

Doing Your Homework

For any project, there are several kinds of current and best practices that can yield valuable information.

✓ **Business problem**—Focus on specific business objectives and investigate how they were addressed in other organizations, the success rate of those efforts, and the advantages and disadvantages of those projects.

✓ **Technical**—Explore the range and variety of technical solutions. Review technical materials, identify hardware and software costs, and analyze the feasibility of implementation.

✓ **Academic and professional**—Investigate resources from universities and professional organizations. Review conference proceedings, peer review journals, books, and published studies. Also consider attending relevant professional conferences.

No matter what kind of current and best practices research you're doing, the following tips will help you conduct a more efficient and useful search.

✓ **Start early.** Much of the information you'll find will be most useful at the beginning of your project. You can make better choices and avoid costly mistakes by learning from the experiences of others.

✓ **Break your problem into key elements or topics.** Write down different words or phrases, using a variety of synonyms to describe the elements. This vocabulary expansion exercise will help you focus your question and search topics.

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- √ **Scope out your topic.** Think of issues typically associated with your particular business problem. It is also important to specify things that are *not* part of your research goals to help place some reasonable limits on your research.
- √ **Formally plan and organize the effort.** Define what you're looking for, write down key questions, and determine what you want to achieve based on your research. Decide on the scope, level of detail, and specificity of your effort before you start.

Conducting the Search

Now you're ready to fire up your Web browser and search the Internet.

- √ **Conduct a broad search.** Start with some of the major search engines using different keywords and word combinations. Narrow your results by formulating a more advanced search. Have a pencil and paper handy to keep track of the sites you visit. Use the bookmark feature on your browser to easily return to the most useful ones later.
- √ **Find organizations with similar business problems.** Look at associations linked to your program area. Check the Web sites of organizations or government agencies that may have implemented innovative solutions. Also check out dissimilar organizations with similar problems; they may provide a new perspective.
- √ **Join listservs.** Look for a listserv corresponding to the subject you are researching. Subscribe to it and use this forum to ask about your project. Regularly monitor lists that seem to provide substantive, ongoing discussions of your topic.

Using Efficient Search Engines

Search engines run keywords against a database. Since search engine databases vary in size, frequency of updates, and search capabilities, you can get a wide variety of results. The following search engines have very large databases, expansive search capabilities, and are good at retrieving relevant and unique hits.

www.altavista.com

Alta Vista has intricate searching capabilities and a large database. It's efficient for complex or specific searches. The engine also provides hits from newsgroup discussions that can be very useful for best or current practices research.

www.google.com

Google ranks hits by the number of incoming links and the popularity of sites. It's good for searches with more than one word. It also features a special search engine solely for federal government documents; you can access *Uncle Sam* at www.google.com/unclesam.

www.hotbot.com

Hotbot is known for user-friendly advanced searches. It will filter your search by language, date, domain (.com, .gov, .edu, etc.), region (United States, New York, etc.), or word.

www.northernlight.com

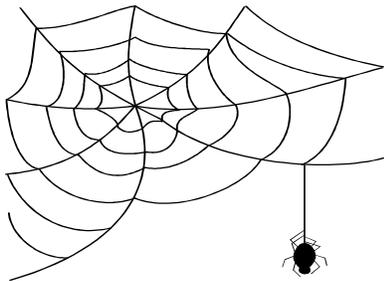
Northern Light is a free search engine and a fee database. It offers access to a special collection of more than 4,500 full text articles for a minimum fee (usually \$1 per page). It organizes the results of your search in folders according to type of documents, subject, or sources.

www.yahoo.com

Yahoo is a directory and not a search engine. It has a collection of more than 500,000 sites pre-classified into more than 25,000 categories.

Harnessing the Power of Metasearch Engines

Metasearch engines provide more extensive coverage by simultaneously searching databases of several of the largest search engines. The following metasearch engines are particularly useful.



www.askjeeves.com

Ask Jeeves looks in several search engines to provide answers to your questions. It groups results by engine as well as by the sites that seem to provide the answers you want.

www.debriefing.com

Debriefing searches for your query in Alta Vista, Excite, HotBot, Infoseek, Lycos, WebCrawler, and Yahoo. It ranks results by relevance and indicates which search engine retrieved them, eliminating duplicate results.

www.dogpile.com

Dogpile looks for results in 25 search engines. It displays results, from specific to general, by search engine.

www.profusion.com

Profusion allows you to select the engines you want searched. You can choose up to nine sources.

Focusing in with Specialized Subject Engines

Specialized subject search engines act as clearinghouses on a wide array of specific topics. They usually consist of guides on particular areas compiled by experts on these subjects. You may want to start with these specialized engines.

www.clearinghouse.net

The Argus Clearinghouse features 13 main categories, including information technology, education, government and law, and social science. The clearinghouse is divided into sub-categories that lead to information on particular topics.

www.vlib.org

The Virtual Library is organized by subjects. It provides bibliographies, Web sites, listservs, and research papers on various topics.

Getting the Most Out of Your Search

The results of your Internet search are only as good as your query. By using the following tips to write a query, you may get more targeted and useful results.

“ ” (quotes)

Use quotes around exact phrases that documents must contain. For example, “*American Marketing Association*” will find documents with this exact phrase.

AND

Use AND to search for documents containing all the words in your query. So, *government AND innovation* will find documents with both these terms.

OR

Use OR to search for documents containing any of a number of words or synonyms.

NOT

NOT excludes documents containing the term that follows it. So, *innovation NOT business* will find documents with innovation that don't mention business.

ADJ

Use ADJ to find documents in which two words appear next to each other.

+ (plus sign)

Use the plus sign to ensure that all words in a query are searched. If your search is *Women in Government*, make sure to type *+women +in +government*.

- (minus sign)

Use the minus sign if you want to make sure your results do not contain a certain word. For example, you can type *+Marketing +Strategy -Consulting* to produce results that don't include consulting companies.

* (asterisk)

Use the asterisk to truncate a word. For example, you can type *consult** and the search engine will retrieve results with *consultant*, *consulting*, and any other word starting with *consult*.

() (parentheses)

Use a combination of signs or words to do your search by putting terms in parentheses. For example, you can type *(American or U.S.) AND presidency*.

Listening to the Experts

Don't rely exclusively on the Web sites you find. Use the search results to identify knowledgeable people you should interview. Most Web sites include contact information for project and program managers. Contact these professionals by e-mail or phone and find out how they handled some of the same kinds of issues and problems your organization is now facing. Make sure you ask targeted questions, know how and when to ask difficult questions about problems or failures, and have a standard method for documenting the interview results. The key is to get information that will be useful in your project.

Learning More

This *Innovations* insert has been adapted from *Conducting Current and Best Practices Research: A Starter Kit*, written by CTG Graduate Assistant Ophelia Eglene. This report is available online at www.ctg.albany.edu/resources/htmlrpt/best-current_kit.html

To learn more about current and best practices research, see *Making Smart IT Choices*, which is available online at www.ctg.albany.edu/resources/smartit.pdf

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