

Monitor as mentor: Internet's role in professional growth

By Mary W. George

Five tactics to help increase knowledge and expertise

A decade ago networking meant just one thing: establishing professional contacts beyond one's immediate colleagues. The methods people used were traditional—meetings, letters, or the telephone—and their reasons for networking varied widely, from the general urge to find others with similar interests, to the specific intent to gain or spread influence. Professional development, in the sense of each individual's efforts to master new concepts, specialties, or techniques, was occasionally a by-product of such networking, but rarely its goal.

I doubt whether this traditional type of networking will ever vanish. If it does, if we eventually conduct every aspect of our professional lives from hermetically sealed workstations with no notion of the human shape or characteristics of those we "touch" or who "touch" us, I hope I will not be around for the experience.

Networking's new dimension

Technology in the mid-1990s has in fact enhanced interpersonal networking. Those of us with access to Bitnet, the Internet, any of the commercial electronic systems, or to campus, local, or regional computer connections, can now supplement our previous ways of networking with online communication. Instead of making a phone call to set a lunch date with a former colleague whom I want to see at an ALA conference, I now make those arrangements via e-mail. Instead of being introduced

to my counterpart at another institution by a mutual acquaintance, I will use a gopher to find her e-mail address and may correspond with her electronically for several years before we ever meet.

Objectives of "wired" professional development

The same technology has vastly enriched and expanded our opportunities for professional development. Whereas previously we relied on journals, formal or informal courses, in-house or association-sponsored workshops, and perhaps teleconferencing to extend our knowledge and expertise, today anyone with access to the Internet literally has at their fingertips all the resources of the electronic world. We must use these resources prudently: our time is not free, even though many of us pretend our connection is.

And, just as we do for user instruction or in any planning process, we must carefully define our objectives. The three I have for my own electronic professional development are: 1) to learn how to expertly negotiate this *terra incognita*, 2) to discover what sorts of information are buried there, and 3) to decide when networked information is superior to printed information for my work. If you have refinements on these or think there are others, please let me know and I will compile them for a future issue.

For any academic librarian who can tap the Internet and whose professional life would be richer as a result—and I cannot imagine any job in our field where that would not be the case—here are five tactics of mine to adopt (or adapt) to increase knowledge and expertise.

Mary George is head of the General and Humanities Reference Division at Princeton University's Firestone Library; e-mail: mugeorge@phoenix.princeton.edu

Tactic #1: Read

Start by reading cover-to-cover a book on electronic networking, geared to your level of experience with computers and the Internet. I browsed several titles in various bookstores before buying Ed Krol's chatty but basic work, *The Whole Internet* (O'Reilly & Assoc., 1992) which I devoured over the 1992-93 New Year's week end. That plus experience led me to realize I need to know more about the Unix operating system, so I intend to purchase an elementary text on that. (Yes, I do use my own and the local public library for works on the topic, but when I sense a long-term commitment to an area, I always want to own at least one title and keep it in my office for reference.)

Read a wide assortment of articles: practical ones like those which appeared recently in this journal, describing Internet resources in particular subject areas such as Russian and East European studies; news reports about how academe, business, and government are struggling or collaborating; technical contributions that discuss how to manipulate electronic documents; and philosophical pieces that speculate about the impact on our lives of the so-called Electronic Superhighway. The best way to identify these is to use your usual multidisciplinary index, whether on paper or online. *Library Literature* now has a separate heading for the Internet, as does *Library & Information Science Abstracts* (classification 13.11). Read appropriate electronic listservs or Usenet newsgroups regularly. Although there is no such thing as a complete directory, that in the back of Krol's book and the more recent compilation by Eric Braun are helpful guides to electronic forums in all disciplines.

Tactic #2: Confer

Find a buddy or two—a colleague, friend, an electronically talented student—to answer your questions patiently and coach you step-by-step through such arcana as unzipping compressed files or modifying your computer's hidden parameters to make some procedure work more smoothly.

Tactic #3: Play

Practice as much as possible in an unpressured environment (not at the reference desk!). Try Hytelnet to browse other libraries' online catalogs. Tackle Rick Gates's monthly *Internet Hunt*, available on several library-related electronic listservs. Work through all the examples

in a text like Richard Smith and Mark Gibb's *Navigating the Internet*. Get comfortable with the many paths and destinations gophers provide. Make sure you can both send and retrieve files using ftp and that you can identify them using Archie and Veronica. Any of these efforts, systematically pursued, will help you become fluent on the Internet.

Tactic #4: Contribute

Share your ideas, comments, and experiences with others, both locally and remotely. Participate in electronic discussions, offer to be a buddy for someone even newer to technology, or teach a workshop on a topic or area you have become expert in.

Tactic #5: Ponder

Reflect on what you are learning and whether there are more efficient or thorough ways to master the Internet. Put yourself in your users' place and brainstorm with colleagues about what is reasonable and possible to expect faculty and students to do on their own and what is an appropriate part of reference service or research consultation. Draft a policy to delineate these areas and then implement it, modifying your guidelines as technology and user sophistication improve.

These are my observations as of early 1994 about the Internet and professional development. It is a very powerful tool, permitting every possible learning style, and conquering it—whether because it is an intrinsic challenge, just plain fun, or the tidal wave of the future—should be a resolution for every academic librarian. ■

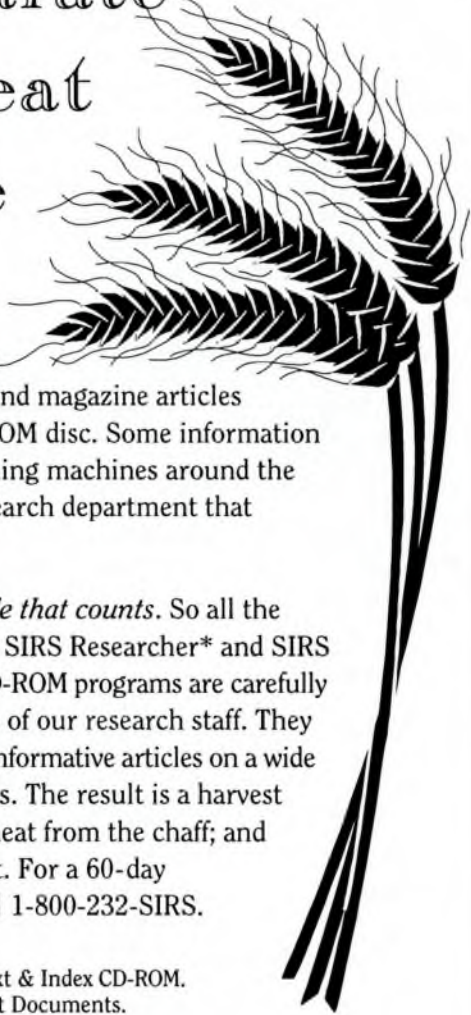
(*Internet cont. from page 141*)

much more. Select "UofM Campus Information," then "University of Minnesota Women's Center."

Other Resources

- SOC.FEMINISM FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) provides "an informal compilation of potential resources for women" and includes feminist organizations, related organizations, feminist and women-oriented publications, feminist and women-oriented electronic mailing lists, and a list of catalogs/bookstores. It is available through ftp to rtfm.mit.edu as "resources" under /pub/usenet/news.answers/feminism. ■

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