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ABSTRACT

A nationwide survey of online searchers at 150 college and university libraries was conducted to explore various characteristics of this group. From a sample of 380 searchers representing 85 libraries, 201 surveys (52.9%) were returned, and 198 responses were usable. Variables examined include online training, searcher experience, professional responsibilities, continuing education, and graduate degrees. It was found that searchers trained by library school classes tended to be younger than the rest of the group. It was also discovered that online searchers with a second masters degree did not have significantly different job responsibilities than those without a second masters. A list of references and statistical tables showing responses to selected survey questions are included. (Author/THC)

Characteristics of Online Searchers in University Libraries

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Abstract

A survey of 198 academic online searchers was used to explore various characteristics about this group. Variables examined included online training, searcher experience, professional responsibilities, continuing education, and graduate degrees. It was found that searchers trained by library school classes tended to be younger than the rest of the group. It was also discovered for this group of online searchers that those having a second masters did not have significantly different job responsibilities than those without a second masters.

Characteristics of Online Searchers in University Libraries

Librarians in academic settings may find themselves spending increasing amounts of time with some capacity of online searching. Since computerized searching is a relatively new responsibility for academic librarians, some of the traditional activities of a reference librarian, including reference desk service, collection development, and bibliographic instruction, may be altered to allow time for online searching.

There is very little literature describing characteristics of online searchers. Collier (1) surveyed users of online services in Europe. He concluded that the "typical searcher" was between "31-45 or 22-30", had an annual salary of $15,000-$30,000, and was probably male. Nitecki (2) based her findings on surveys sent to members of the Reference and Adult Services Division of the American Library Association. She discovered that most of the respondents were female, in their forties, and had worked in the profession for over 10 years. Neither of these two studies dealt exclusively with academic librarians.

The purpose of the paper is to identify characteristics of online searchers in an academic setting. In order to describe who is searching, various characteristics will be discussed including searcher training, continuing education, age, gender, professional degrees and experience. It is hoped that this data can be used to assist others in their research efforts regarding online searchers.

METHOD

A nationwide survey was used to gather data for this study. One hundred and fifty college and university libraries were randomly selected from the 1931 American Library Directory. From that sample 380 online searchers, representing 35 libraries, were willing to participate. Two hundred and one surveys (52.9%) were returned, and 198 of those were usable.

A portion of the survey was used for the present study. Participants were asked about their experiences pertaining to online searching including training, primary responsibilities (reference, administration), search experience, training workshops, and online journals. Each variable will be discussed individually.

RESULTS

Training

There are a number of different ways for librarians to learn how to search. Library schools offer classes in online searching, and training workshops are available throughout the country to teach interested participants how to search. The librarians in this survey were asked how they were trained in online searching. Respondents were asked to rank which of the types of training were influential for them. Scores ranged from one (1) for most influential to five (5) for not at all influential. Table I illustrates that vendor workshops are a common form of training for these searchers. (Insert Table I). Over half (56%) of the

respondents indicated that vendor workshops were most influential for them. Training received from a colleague was also a prevalent response. About 50% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that training by colleagues was influential. Another moderately influential factor was the ability of the searchers to teach themselves how to search. Searchers are constantly updating their skills as they run searches and discover results. This self-teaching process is probably constantly taking place. This could explain the high marks for self-teaching as a moderately influential variable. Library school was not a very influential learning source. Over half (59%) of the respondents indicated that library school had little or no influence for them.

These results have various implications. Younger searchers may not have had the opportunity to be taught online searching other than through library school courses. They may not have much experience in the library profession and would, therefore, not be exposed to online training sessions or assistance from colleagues. On the other hand, older searchers may not have had the chance to be trained for online searching from library school if they were in library school more than ten years ago. To see if this hypothesis was plausible, a t-test was done between one group that agreed or strongly agreed that library school was influential and another group that was neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that library school was influential. Results indicated that the second group was indeed older, and, therefore, may not have had the opportunity to have online training at a library school. ($t = -2.82$, $p = .006$).

Searcher Experience

Searchers were asked how many searches per week they perform. For this survey a search was defined as the response to one request in one database. Table II illustrates the results. (Insert Table II). The mean number of searches performed per week was 6.1 while the median was 3.8.

Another way to determine searcher experience is to measure how long one has searched. Participants were asked to indicate how many years they have been searching. Respondents for this survey had searched an average of 3.7 year. A majority of the respondents have searched less than four years, therefore, the median of 3.0 years may be a slightly more accurate representation of the central tendency of the years searched.

Professional time

Are more online searchers reference librarians, administrators or catalogers? Results of this survey indicated that 12% of these searchers spend over 50% of their time with reference desk responsibilities. Table III illustrates that this is the group that spends 50% or more of their time at any one responsibility. (Insert Table III). It is interesting to note that seven out of 193 searchers from this survey indicated that they spend over 50% or more of their time on online searching or closely allied tasks.

In the 26%-50% column, reference desk responsibilities still made up a larger portion of the searchers' time with 49% of the respondents indicating that their professional time was spent in this manner. However, 18% responded that 26-50% of their time was

spent with administrative duties. Additionally, 12% identified that 26%-50% of their time was spent with online searching or closely allied tasks, and 13% spent 26%-50% of their time in "other" activities, mainly collection development.

By examining the activities making up only 0-10% of the searchers' time schedule, one can see how these searchers do not spend their time. Ninety-five percent indicated that they spend 10% or less time doing formal research. They also do not spend much time teaching (78%). In addition, over half (58%) of the searchers devote 10% or less of their time with online searching activities. This finding indicates that even though online searching may be influencing the nature of library services, librarians spend very little time incorporating this relatively new service into their time schedules.

To determine if those searching less were older or otherwise different, t-tests were done using age, years searched, gender, and second degree as the dependent variables. The independent variable was percent of time spent searching. This time was divided by those who searched 11% or less of their professional time and those who searched 12% or more of their time. Results indicated that age and number of years searched were significant ($p < .05$) which shows that those spending 11% or less time searching are a bit older and have searched fewer years than the rest of the sample. Second degree and gender were not significant. This would indicate that those having a second degree do not search any more or less than those having solely the M.L.S. It also shows that females and males do not differ in amount of time spent searching.

Continuing Education

Online searchers need to keep aware of current activities in the field because of its rapidly changing nature. Databases are being added and deleted with relative frequency, and search command language is also often revised. In order to be an efficient searcher, one may need to acquire a regular habit of perusing the online literature or attending online workshops.

Respondents were asked to indicate how many online training sessions they had attended in the last 12 months. Table IV shows that 50% of the searchers attended one or two online sessions within the past year, while 9% attended five or more sessions. (Insert Table IV). However, 20% of the searchers responded that they had not attended any online training sessions in the last year. This could imply that either they do not feel a need for training sessions, they do not have the time to attend training sessions, or they live in such a remote area that training sessions are not easily accessible.

Searchers were then asked if they had taught online training sessions in the past 12 months. Not surprisingly, 75% indicated they had not taught a training session in the past year, while 6% had taught five or more sessions. These results would be expected since surveys were sent to university librarians and not to representatives of online databases or vendors.

Another way to keep abreast of online developments is to read online journals. Searchers were asked to indicate whether they read Database , Online , Online Review , and College and Research Libraries on a regular basis. They were also asked to

rank how influential these journals were in keeping them aware of current activities in the field of online searching. Ratings ranged from one (1) as very influental to five (5) as not at all influential. Table V illustrates that many of the respondents read all four journals but indicated that they are of varied usefulness in regards to online searching. (Insert Table V). The searchers choose Online as the most influential journal with an average rating of 1.6. Database had an average influential rating of 2.2 while College and Research Libraries was less than moderately influential at 3.1, and Online Review was the least influential concerning online activities with a score of 3.3 Many respondents commented that there was really no "good" journal for online searching. Participants were also asked to identify any other journals, excluding vendor or system newsletters, that informed them of current happenings. Two journals, RQ and Journal of the American Society of Information Science , were mentioned a number of times.

These findings contradict those of Collier (3). He reported that 59% of his respondents subscribed to Online Review while only 37% subscribed to Online . However, his results may be biased. His survey was distributed to subscribers of Online Review , therefore his results are not surprising. Since Online Review is international in scope, it could also be plausible that European searchers read it more often than online journals published in the United States.

Gender, age, and marital status

Table VI illustrates personal characteristics about the

respondents. (Insert Table VI). Sixty-six percent of the searchers were women, and over half (55%) of the participants were in their 30's. Fifty-three percent of the searchers were also married. Collier (4) reported that 56% of his respondents were men, and most participants ranged in age from 31 to 45. His results are significantly different from these (χ =33.93, p <.01), but it is difficult to speculate as to why.

Graduate degrees

A controversial issue involving academic librarians is the second masters degree as many job positions now require more than one graduate degree. Respondents were asked to identify their graduate degrees, and Table VII shows that over 99% of the searchers had a Masters in Library Science. (Insert Table VII). However, 33% had earned a second masters, while 3% had a doctorate degree. Possible responses did not include progress towards a graduate degree. It appears that even though there may be pressure to acquire a second graduate degree, only one third of these searchers had more than one graduate degree.

T-tests were done between those with and without a second graduate degree to determine if job responsibilities were significantly different between the two groups. The variables used were those indicated in Table III which includes percent of time spent with online searching, reference desk responsibilities, administrative duties and so on. Results of these t-tests were not significant which indicates that the second graduate degree and job responsibilities are not related for this sample of online searchers.

CONCLUSION

Results of this study indicate that a diversity exists when describing characteristics of online searchers. For example, this study has shown that the mean for the variable searches/week is misleading. To say that the "typical searcher" performed 6.1 searches/week does not take into account the skewness or range of the data. As mentioned before, Table II shows that the data are fairly evenly distributed between the categories of 1-5 searches/week. However, Collier (5) describes the findings of his study by identifying characteristics which make up the "typical searcher". His conclusions are a bit misleading because he was not accounting for the diversity of responses.

It is interesting to note that vendor workshops were a prevalent form of online training for this sample of online searchers. Library school was not as common for online training, but those who were taught through library school tended to be younger than the rest of the sample.

Even though online searching is a relatively new job activity for many academic librarians, not much professional time is spent with online searching. Fifty-eight percent of the librarians from this sample spent less than 11% of their professional time with online searching. Those librarians were a bit older and had searched less years than the rest of the respondents.

Data gathered concerning graduate degrees of the searchers were not too surprising. Over 99% of the online searchers had obtained a Masters in Library Science, while a third of the respondents had earned a second masters. Interestingly, those

having a second masters did not have significantly different job responsibilities than those with solely the M.L.S. Approximately 3% of the searchers had earned a doctorate.

It is hoped that these results will contribute to the future research concerning online searchers. As vital as online searching has become to the academic librarian, more empirical research is needed to understand how the relatively new area of online searching will affect the other job responsibilities of the academic librarian.

References

1. H.R. Collier, "European Online Users: a Mid-1981 Report," Online Review 6:27-37 (February 1982).
2. D.A. Nitecki, "Attitudes Toward Automated Information Retrieval Among RASD Members," in On-Line Bibliographic Services: Where We Are, Where We're Going, ed. Peter G. Watson (Chicago: ALA, 1977), p. 10-23.
3. Collier, "European Online Users", p. 31.
4. Ibid, p. 30.
5. Ibid, p. 36.

TABLE I

Online Training

Frequencies and Row Percentages

"How were you trained to do online searching?"
Rank items listed; 1-most influential to
5-not at all influential.

N=198

	1	2	3	4	5	Total
vendor training workshops	97 (56%)	32 (18%)	25 (14%)	9 (5%)	11 (6%)	174
library school	26 (20%)	17 (13%)	10 (8%)	25 (20%)	50 (39%)	128
self taught	20 (12%)	60 (38%)	57 (36%)	16 (10%)	7 (4%)	160
taught by colleague	36 (22%)	45 (28%)	47 (29%)	22 (14%)	11 (7%)	161
other (please specify)	4 (10%)	7 (17%)	6 (14%)	7 (17%)	17 (41%)	41

TABLE II

Searcher Experience

"On the average, how many searches do you perform each week? Let a search be defined as the response to one request in one database."

Amount	Frequency	Percent
1	40	20%
2-3	49	25%
4-5	47	24%
6-10	30	15%
11-50	25	13%
missing	7	4%

mean = 6.1 median = 3.8 sd = 7.51

"How many years have you been searching online?"

Amount	Frequency	Percent
1	38	19%
2	40	20%
3	36	18%
4-5	32	16%
6-12	45	23%
missing	7	4%

mean = 3.7 median = 3.0 sd = 2.577

TABLE III

Professional Responsibilities

"What percentage of your professional time is spent on the following services?"

N=198

	Percent of time			
Service	0-10%	11-25%	26-50%	>50%
online searching or closely allied tasks	116 (58%)	51 (26%)	24 (12%)	7 (4%)
reference desk responsibilities	29 (15%)	48 (24%)	97 (49%)	24 (12%)
formal research	188 (95%)	7 (4%)	3 (2%)	0 (0%)
administrative duties	106 (54%)	41 (21%)	36 (18%)	15 (8%)
teaching	154 (78%)	38 (19%)	6 (3%)	0 (0%)
other (please specify)	110 (56%)	48 (24%)	25 (13%)	15 (8%)

TABLE IV

Online Training Sessions

N=198

"How many online training sessions have you attended in the last 12 months?"

Amount	Frequency	Percent
0	39	20%
1-2	99	50%
3-4	42	21%
5 or more	18	9%

"How many online training sessions have you taught in the last 12 months?"

Amount	Frequency	Percent
0	149	75%
1-2	29	15%
3-4	8	4%
5 or more	12	6%

TABLE V

Online Journals

"Do you read the following on a regular basis? If so, which help you keep aware of current activities? Rank the journals from 1-most influential to 5-not at all influential."

	Do you read?		Influential?
	Yes	No	mean score
Database	95 (55%)	79 (45%)	2.2
Online	128 (68%)	59 (32%)	1.6
Online Review	37 (25%)	109 (75%)	3.3
College and Research Libraries	155 (81%)	37 (19%)	3.1

TABLE VI

Personal Characteristics
of Respondents

N=198

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
Gender:		
Female	131	66%
Male	66	33%
no response	1	-
Age:		
less than 20	0	0%
20-29	32	16%
30-39	109	55%
40-49	34	17%
50-59	17	9%
60 and over	5	2%
no response	1	-
Marital Status:		
single	68	34%
married	104	53%
divorced	22	11%
no response	4	-

Table VII

Graduate Degrees

N = 198

	Yes	No	No response
M.L.S.	193 (99%)	1 (.5%)	4
Second Masters	64 (33%)	130 (67%)	4
Ph.D.	6 (3%)	188 (97%)	4