



“Online Information: In a Collaborative Environment, Who Can Be Trusted?”

By Dennis Killian, Vice President and Education Evangelist, Safari Books Online

Online sources are a necessary and practical way to find information. The key to success is to filter out imprecise and outdated research. Knowing how to pull expert and relevant facts and figures from the Internet or a subscription service has several benefits. It's convenient, increases productivity and saves time. Remember, this skill is not inconsequential. Your job or next project may depend on it.



Computers have become more complex in recent years as demands on systems have continued to increase in size due to the amount of external devices, software, hardware, and communication components. Technical professionals are depending more and more on the Internet, a blog, or a peer whenever they need to research complex technologies. But in this

digital age, when information is just a click away, how do you know what information can be trusted?

Few developers have the time to go to the library and search volumes of printed materials. So, the next logical source is the Internet. Entering a term or subject into a search-engine is easy and it may produce hundreds of informational sources, but are they factual? The problem is that anyone can publish on the Internet and most tech workers don't have the time to verify their findings. Here are several strategies to employ the next time you find yourself in this situation.

Strategy 1: Use More than One Source. This may seem obvious, but you'd be surprised at how many people only use one source of information. A ground rule that many scholarly journals and magazines employ is a minimum of two sources to verify each cited reference; of course, the more the better. For example, perhaps your manager asked you to prepare a business case on why it is advantageous to upgrade to a more advanced piece of hardware or software. Where should you look for the information? In today's fluid web environment, due diligence on the part of the researcher needs to be employed. The accuracy of content is only as good as its contributors. Always use more than one source.

Strategy 2: Use the CARS Checklist. Informed decisions depend on a variety of factors. The CARS Checklist (Credibility,

Accuracy, Reasonableness, and Support) is easy to use and is an invaluable aid to online researchers. This checklist can be found at <http://www.dushkin.com/online/webresearch/cars.mhtml>

The ten page article on this site can be perused in depth if you have the time. It advises such things as using your browser to see when a Web page was last modified and lists indicators on how to spot inaccuracies in your research. But if you're in a hurry, jump to the Summary section which enumerates important points for each category.

- **Credibility.** CARS urges the researcher to review the author's credentials when deciding whether or not the source is trustworthy. For instance, if you've just been asked to research the validity of converting from a Windows-based system to Linux you'll want to be sure to quote the top experts in the industry, both pro and con.
- **Accuracy.** CARS recommends ensuring the information is "correct, up-to date, factual, detailed, exact and comprehensive." For instance, even though a computer guru was at the top of his field regarding Windows ten years ago doesn't mean that he knows beans about Linux today.
- **Reasonableness.** CARS asks that you consider whether the source is fair and objective. Is the source impartial on the subject of databases or is he really trying to promote a certain product?
- **Support.** CARS warns the technical professional to corroborate the information of the source. For example, if you're quoting claims of fact and statistics to strengthen the viewpoint that Linux is a better operating system than Windows, then it's a good idea to follow the information trail. Where did the information come from? Is contact information provided so that you can directly contact the source or author?

There are also other valuable web research tips available at this site.



IT Job Feature

Strategy 3: Wikipedia. URL: Wikipedia.com. Wikipedia—you either love it or hate it. Most knowledge workers love it. But Wikipedia has been criticized for its inaccuracies despite the host of editors that are incessantly updating its contributors' mistakes. It's said that most of the information is correct, but keep in mind that no source is infallible, especially when written by anonymous contributors.

For example, in a January 2007 nytimes.com article, author Jonathan Dee cites an example whereby someone created a Wikipedia "stub" which he says is a "placeholder" that is often "one sentence in length." Contributors then build upon the opening sentence or idea. The particular stub that Dee cites in his article was about "the arrest of a half-dozen Muslim men supposedly planning to attack Fort Dix." The stub entry was titled, "Fort Dix Terror Plot." Many other contributions and expansions were added, but a self-appointed editor named Matthew Gruen "expanded and shaped" the account 59 times. Who is Matthew Gruen? Matthew Gruen is a junior in high school. The entry may or may not be accurate. Wikipedia personnel claim that inaccuracies will eventually be corrected, but do you really want to bet your next project on such data?

Strategy 4: Online Subscriptions. Online subscription sites offer a variety of technical, business and e-reference materials. If you find the need to quickly become the workgroup expert on JavaScript or Linux, then an online subscription may be for you. For instance, a subscription database can contain thousands of leading technical books. To obtain information on a certain subject, the researcher types a phrase into a search box, clicks, and an entire list of books appear. At the best sites, the material is available in multiple formats, including video. Study guides are also available on various topics to help technology professionals ready themselves for certification exams.

Strategy 5: White Papers. Many technical professionals tuck white papers into their arsenal when they need quick, in-depth

knowledge on technologies in different markets. A recent entry of "white papers" typed into a popular search engine produced over 4 million hits. Many white papers are free and contain great information. A recent white paper found on Bitpipe.com; a technical library of white papers, product literature, webcasts and case studies, explained how to implement a master data management strategy.

However, it's good to keep in mind that some white papers are used by businesses as a marketing or sales tool. Again, sift the good information from the hype by implementing CARS. In the event that you're the one that needs to write a white paper, there are also instructions available on the best way to approach such a task. For instance, www.writingwhitepapers.com will send a free chapter of Michael Stelzner's book, "Writing White Papers" if you sign up for their newsletter. There's also a blog and lots of free information on the web site including useful links such as <http://www.whitepapersource.com> But remember, white papers aren't necessarily searchable to the paragraph. You'll have to go through a lot of them to find the exact information that is needed. A subscription database offers a faster and more exact response.

About Author

For more than 25 years, Dennis has served in sales, general management and consulting capacities in the technology sector. Prior to joining Safari Books Online, he served as Vice President of Sales and Marketing for WiLine Networks. Additionally, he has held several senior-level positions including various management positions with AT&T; Vice President of Sales for TELUS Corporation in Canada; President and CEO of Professional Sales Learning Center; Vice President and GM for a software division of Trintech, Inc; and Vice President of Enterprise Services for NEC Solutions America. Dennis earned a BSME from the United States Naval Academy and a Master's in Business Administration from St. Mary's College.

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