

# Introduction

In the spring of 1991 I had stayed late at the library in the College of St. Scholastica with a group of other grad students. We were supposed to be studying for a final in online research, but the conversation drifted to real life and the practicality of what we were learning. “Well, I heard you can make money finding stuff for people in these databases,” one person at the table remarked. “The yellow-pages advertising deadline is next week, so I’m going to throw an ad together and see what happens.”

I never saw the ad in the local phone book, and to my knowledge not much happened with this individual by way of a business, but the concept was fascinating. Since I absolutely *loved* online research and the Boolean logic on which it was based, and the thought of working professionally from home was so appealing, my investigation began. Was it true? Was this legitimate? Would people actually pay me to do research for them, and was there in fact an entire industry developing around this concept?

As it goes with most aspiring independent information professionals, this investigation led to two things—the late Sue Ruggie’s book, *The Information Broker’s Handbook* [230, see Appendix], and the Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP) [172]. Both were encouraging sources of practical advice and personal stories that affirmed, yes, this business was legitimate and in fact quite exciting.

Over the years I have spent researching and eventually entering this field, what I have enjoyed most is getting to know some very interesting people and learning how they combine their business and research skills to succeed as entrepreneurs. How they know where to look for answers. How

they are able to function alone and yet be highly effective with clients. How they run a business and make money. How their work increases their clients' bottom line. How they balance everything in their lives. How they are able to see connections between the marketplace and their clients' information needs. And how they explain the value of their services.

These are the stories of eleven Super Searchers who did Make It On Their Own, and who exemplify two major trends in today's society—the explosion of the Information Age and the rise of the independent professional.

It's widely noted that some time after World War II, knowledge began to drive the world's major economies, and today we find ourselves overwhelmed. We see more information in a month than people in the nineteenth century saw in their entire lives. Think about it—books, videos, TV, radio, CD-ROMs, DVDs, newspapers, magazines, databases, microfilm, billboards, people's heads, and now the Internet. So much of our time is spent filtering and searching for relevance. It's a far cry from simply reading the bulletin board at the town hall once a month or hearing the latest from the neighbors. We need professional help to keep track of it all.

Combine the concept of information overload with the acceptance of outsourcing work to independent professionals in today's marketplace, and you begin to see part of a much bigger picture. The home-based worker, the micropreneur, the consultant, or, as author Daniel Pink has identified them in his recent book, members of the “Free Agent Nation” [226]—whatever term is used, conservative estimates come in at around 30 million independent workers in the United States alone. Some call it nothing less than an economic revolution, as people reclaim their freedom and take control of their professional and personal lives. It's exciting to know we are not alone.

In the spirit of the Super Searcher series, you will learn about research tips, techniques, and sources. We'll cover the same ground that some of the information industry's leading experts cover each day: How Mary Ellen Bates knows when to go to the commercial online services and when to go to a Dear Abby column. Why Marty Goffman does an exhaustive patent search and how this goes far beyond a quick check of the Internet. How Tom Culbert uses a combination of dusty archive collections and talking to the right people. Why Amelia Kassel sticks to online and tailors her specialization around that. How Chris Sherman identifies and tracks the newest search engine technologies and analyzes their usefulness for searchers. How Peggy Carr

collaborates with other independents and why she still believes in brick-and-mortar libraries. What kind of information is public record, how it is useful to Lynn Peterson's clients, and why this brand of research is not for the novice. How Jodi Gregory serves her niche markets and has the client satisfaction measurements to prove her effectiveness. How Chris Dobson helps companies develop their own information tools. How Crystal Sharp operates in Canada, doing both secondary and primary research. How Mark Goldstein absorbs between 200 print and 300 electronic information subscriptions each month and shares this knowledge with his clients.

But we're going to go two steps beyond following these Super Searchers through databases, libraries, print media, and the Internet. The first step is into the marketplace where the validity and value of information research is put to the test. Searchers know good information when they see it, but there is a whole new level of skill involved in finding clients, cultivating relationships, and delivering a product that satisfies a need. There is the matter of a business to run, with bills to pay and daily tasks to be done. There is knowing how much work to take on, and when to outsource. There are issues such as copyright and licensing and how they affect the information retrieval and delivery process. And perhaps most importantly, there is the issue of marketing—or, as small business experts Paul and Sarah Edwards [96] put it, getting business to come to you.

The second step we'll take beyond searching is into the personal realm. Who are these people? What combination of education and experience do they have? How do they balance work and play? Do they work 24/7 or do they have a life? What do they particularly like about what they do? Is it the thrill of the hunt? What opportunities do they see for the future? While I promise we won't talk about kids and dogs (okay—we'll give equal time to cats) too much, this is an important piece to include, because not only was getting to know these people so much fun, but it takes a well-rounded individual to keep everything together and run an independent research business at the same time. Running a business and being a searcher can swallow up a person's life unless deliberate choices to maintain balance are made. And one more point: As you read each person's story, it is interesting to see the common threads emerge: how they discovered information research, the emergence of personal computer technology, the downsizing of corporations, the desire for a flexible lifestyle, the appearance of the

Internet, and the realization that they were not alone in finding and pursuing the opportunity of independence.

You've heard the phrases, "Information is power," "To stay ahead of the competition you've got to stay informed," and "Smart decisions are based on the right information at the right time." The independent information profession is all about identifying that critical information and getting it into the hands of clients. You could think of the work product of an independent information professional as a tailored evening newscast—as if a broadcast journalist had spent his or her day searching the world on your behalf, so you have the precise information you need at the end of yours. It's about a basic formula for business success—define a need, meet that need, and deliver results. And never stop learning, evaluating, and improving.

One of the challenges in creating this book was ending it. If not for a deadline and the reality of other time constraints, it would have been easy to keep going and interview many more information business owners. The people I interviewed reflect a mix of generalists and niche researchers, including many who have adapted to change and found new opportunities in those changes. Ten years ago there was no need for search engine analysts, but today searchers depend on the information they provide. Ten years ago independent information professionals would be called upon to locate basic company information, but today this kind of information is just a few keystrokes away from everyone's desktop.

Although many people do more of their own research nowadays, we battle the perception that everything is on the Internet and it's free for the taking, like picking cherries off a tree in July—as if quality, timeliness, validity, and relevance have all been preapproved by "computers." So, educating clients about information itself has emerged as a valuable service.

You'll also meet people in different stages of business development. Some have reached a level where they are established in the industry, with a stable of repeat clients. Others are looking ahead, still developing their products, services, and techniques. Describing who we are and what we do is a moving target, and it's worth taking a look at different levels of development and different stages in the entrepreneurial thought process, as well as different types of research businesses.

Finally, it needs to be said that independent-minded people tend to speak their minds; that's an integral part of their personalities. They are not afraid

to disagree and often have strong opinions. You'll hear some of those opinions in the pages that follow. You'll find common ground as well as individual expression.

One issue on which the interviewees differ is what we should call ourselves as a profession. The debate arises repeatedly. While some like the term "information broker" and often link it to the high ethical standards held by industry pioneer Sue Ruge, others feel the media has compromised the term in the public's mind. Quite unfortunately, "information broker" has become the term of choice in sensationalized stories featuring hackers, identity thieves, and dumpster divers. Its misuse has created a dilemma for the small information business owner, who lacks the clout to stand up and say, "Hey, you just really insulted me!" to the Federal Trade Commission or major media outlets.

"Shady information broker" stories are a great source of frustration for those of us in the field, because even cursory research on the part of federal investigators and journalists would reveal AIIP as the leading professional organization, along with the Web sites of top practitioners in the industry. One thing that has characterized AIIP from the beginning has been the establishment and promotion of a code of ethical business practice, and this has encouraged high standards among members of the profession. You don't survive in this industry if you break the rules, and word does get around. Those rules include not misrepresenting yourself to obtain information and not obtaining any information through illegal means. Perhaps the profession itself has fallen victim to a larger case of identity theft. The best way to take it back is by successfully serving one client at a time, because word gets around when something good is happening, too. For our purposes here, and in line with AIIP, we'll just go with the term independent information professional, or IIP.

That said, here are some observations from my experience of spending time with the pros. By no means is this an exhaustive list of industry trends, as much more could be said about searching, marketing, business management, and deliverables.

## The Business

- Working from home has gained acceptance in the marketplace. Most professionals are now quite comfortable

with the concept, and no longer feel they need to act like they have a “real” office. While routines and schedules still must be adhered to, it’s no big deal if the dog barks in the background. That said, some IIPs do lease commercial office space, whether for increased visibility, room for growth and expansion, or just a clearer separation of work and personal life.

- A field once dominated by library science professionals has grown and evolved to include those with business, marketing, legal, scientific, and particular industry focuses. The researcher develops industry expertise, or the industry expert learns to do research.
- While business cards, brochures, newsletters, and advertising have their place, the most effective marketing technique for IIPs is networking. To build a business, it is necessary to get out of the office and shake hands with people.
- IIPs need to generate their own visibility and establish their own credibility. Writing for publications and speaking at conferences are effective tools, as is participation on email lists and volunteering for professional association duties.
- As in any business, there is a need to define a target market and go where clients and potential clients hang out—niche industry conferences, professional or trade association meetings, or local business functions.
- Most IIPs draw upon the professional services of accountants, attorneys, and Web designers unless they themselves have specific expertise in these areas. Sue Ruge’s time-honored advice, “Do what you do best and hire out the rest,” is a recurring theme.

- In long-term relationships, both the client and the IIP are well served. The IIP can stay in touch with the client's internal issues and information needs, yet offer a fresh perspective from the outside. The client develops an understanding of the IIP's capabilities and resources, which often leads to more work.
- Most IIPs consider a Web page a necessity. They use it to establish a presence and educate potential clients about their services. It is not usually intended as a way to obtain clients, although, as search engine technology and Internet user sophistication improves, some IIPs feel this is changing. Sample projects or particular skill sets described on their sites have, in fact, sometimes been picked up by Web surfers, resulting in large projects.
- While not working for one organization affords a certain freedom and independence, it increases personal accountability and potential liability. A careful eye toward contracts, claims, and confidentiality agreements is needed.

## **The Work**

- While most projects are delivered to clients electronically these days, a hard copy can sometimes tell a better story and serve as an effective marketing tool. Nice-looking reports often get passed around and into the hands of potential clients.
- There is less demand now for traditional information delivery, or "rip and ship," as it was commonly known. Most projects involve at least a degree of analysis and value-added work. Clients can easily retrieve basic information from the Internet.

- One of the most common reasons to go online is to locate experts—authors, academics, industry analysts, and executives. Finding an on-target article is often just the beginning of the research process.
- The growth of the Internet and the resulting information glut has increased appreciation for the skills of an information professional. Clients will often call for help when they have spent hours trying to find something on their own and are frustrated with their inability to do so.
- Finding an industry niche and offering specialized services is almost essential these days. Specialization is necessary for clear communication in marketing. On a practical level, too, you can't be an expert in everything. Nor can you simply say, "I am a researcher."
- Whether it is referred to as the reference interview or "determining client needs," it is an integral part of the research process. Understanding how the information will be used also aids in project development.
- End-user adoption of information services has not erased the need for IIPs. What is emerging is more of a consulting role in the client's organization. While developments like natural language searching and ask-a-question services might appear threatening on a competitive level, a computer cannot step back and see the big picture. A computer cannot form a relationship.

## **The People**

- To make it on your own, you have to be your own driving force. There is nobody telling you what to do. You have to want to succeed, and you have to be committed. Taking



the risk makes you halfway successful already, because you have to believe in the concept of your own success. The fact that you're willing to shed your dependence on a single organization speaks for itself.

- You need a combination of skills and the ability to switch gears. You need to be able to work alone as well as interact effectively with clients, potential clients, and colleagues.
- Nothing is ever simple. If anything characterizes this group of people in terms of personality, it is an insatiable thirst for information. No stone is left unturned in the search for an answer, even when making personal decisions.
- Time management and organization are big issues, and people take different approaches. While some love gadgets and have every possible electronic device networked and wired together, others keep life simple, refusing to get even a cell phone.
- Networking, referrals, and cooperation tend to characterize these individuals, as opposed to a competitive spirit. To a large extent, individual success contributes to the growth and recognition of the profession.

In line with the format of the other books in the Super Searcher series, we did not include Web site URLs within the interviews. As you might imagine, this group of people had a lot to say about the sites and sources they rely on, so I have compiled a resource list as an appendix; I note such references in the text where appropriate. Although such a list becomes a moving target as well, it is still extremely valuable, running the gamut from niche sources to general business sites. This list will be periodically updated at the Information Today page, [www.supersearchers.com](http://www.supersearchers.com). We did not include a glossary, since it no longer seems necessary to define terms such as modem, bookmark, or ISP. We speak the same language nowadays as our clients—and the general public.

Once again I am grateful to each of the individuals you will meet in the following pages. What they have to say will enlighten, educate, and inspire you. They will inspire you not by sharing stories of their glamorous jet-set lifestyles, but by providing a reality check on starting and running your own business. Hard work, intelligence, and a measure of calculated risk are what you will see, and a future with wide-open opportunities. I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed creating it, and that those considering a career as an independent information professional will be inspired to take the plunge.