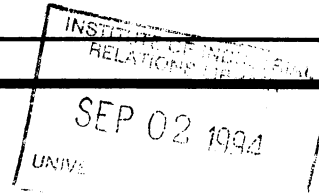


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Information and Empowerment:

## RESEARCH SKILLS AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

by Terence K. Huwe

**M**uch has been made of the economic shift from manufacturing toward information. It's a dynamic image: a new model for post-industrial prosperity, based on information as a commodity, and dependent upon a skilled, computer literate workforce. The icons of this brave new world have an "informed" ring to them: knowledge workers, paperless offices, online databases, and so on.

There is no doubt that the rapid acceptance of electronic information is affecting workers everywhere. Yet the more things change, the more they stay the same: these smart systems are only as smart as the human beings who use them. One of the most basic levels at which workers can keep track of this changing climate is to build and retain basic information-gathering techniques. Whether the issue is plant closures, reduced benefits, or just career development, doing background research prepares us for change.

Yet a gap exists between information "haves" and "have-nots." The traditional sources of information and guidance for common people—libraries—have been a low funding priority for over a decade. Both individual workers and organized labor must take initiative in learning how to use new information technology. Librarians call this skill "information literacy." Research skill is presumed to be taught during high school and college educational careers. In reality, learning how to do research is left to the self-motivated. Many students graduate knowing information from their textbooks, but very little about how to find out what's new in their fields.

How does this deficit affect workers and organizers? After all, "research" is a grandiose term that conjures up visions of scientists or lawyers with high-powered credentials. The

answer may be found in the simplicity and relevance of the dictionary's definition of research. Webster's Seventh Collegiate Edition defines research as "Careful or diligent search . . . aimed at the discovery of new facts." For unionists, fact-finding is vital, whether it involves building a financial profile of privately held-firms, tracking litigation in the courts, or gaining background knowledge on bargaining issues. While many international offices maintain research staff and special libraries, basic research is just as important at the local level. What's more, a firm grasp of the important issues facing the local office can improve the local's bargaining efforts.

### Doing Your Homework

The ability to do one's own "homework" is empowering when it is clearly relevant to real-life concerns. Consider the following true stories from the reference desk at the Institute of Industrial Relations Library.

- A worker at a large midwestern manufacturer was increasingly concerned that his work group was being asked to move too quickly. His employer was known for employee participation, but in reality, everyone felt pushed on the line. He was so worried about confidentiality that he called Berkeley rather than a source nearer to home. A

consultation with the librarian yielded some good news: there were local occupational safety groups in his area who would respect confidentiality, as well as a thicket of periodical articles about the company, at a cost of under \$10 in copying and postage. For another \$15, he was able to obtain detailed financial information about the firm using a financial information database.

- A management consultant was hired to develop a program to ease the return of striking workers to their jobs after a settlement. His fee was quite high (well over one hundred dollars per hour), but he was finding himself stumped by a lack of information. After asking Institute library staff to do a detailed, online literature search, he found a couple of examples of other programs. He also gleaned some names of individuals he could call, and the telephone number for a human resources association. Time was of the essence, and he paid a premium: over \$300 in electronic database fees and "document delivery" charges.

In comparison, consider also these examples of lost opportunity as cited by the American Library Association's 1989 report on information literacy.

- A team of four scientists worked for a year on a new product, only to find from a corporate library that a patent was already held on their concept. The patent database search might have cost about \$300; unfortunately, the firm spent \$500,000 in research funds, **before doing its homework.**
- A librarian at another firm did a literature search and uncovered a technical solution to a production problem that has been implemented for some time at other firms. The search could have been performed at the outset, resulting in the same savings that competing firms had enjoyed.

## Information and Power: Pathways for Everyone

These stories illustrate several interesting dynamics between information and power. Three aspects are especially important for organized labor. First, both the worker and the consultant had equal access to information, in various media, despite the size of their pocketbooks. The approach that each took was dictated by time and funds. Second, the worker's story illustrates that a significant amount of knowledge can be found in low-cost sources, if you know how to look, and **how to ask for help.** Lastly, even though the corporations mentioned above employed information literate staff (in these cases, the librarians), they used them too late, rendering their organizations illiterate and embarrassed. Work leaders and executives need to consider their information needs before they chart a course, or else face major consequences.

The development of life long learning skills has become a key management tool. It is also an important concern for community and labor leaders who must respond to constant change in the economy. Learning these skills is like any journey; it begins with a step. What's more, even those who may have disliked research in school settings may find that

research about real-life concerns can be much more rewarding. If the issues strike close to home—such as the termination of employer-paid day care, or shrinking health benefits for retirees—there is a strong incentive to learn what is happening, and why.

The ability to locate reliable information is a starting point in responding effectively to changes such as these. Given that labor relations will be in a state of constant change in the coming years, workers in every type of job should be prepared to find information to help them respond. A few starting points for potential researchers follow below, as a stimulus.

## Developing a Research Checklist

**Person-to Person.** People are the best source of information and answers. If we're ever taught this, it's the first thing we forget in the workplace. Treat personal contacts like solid gold. Both government and business are full of people whose jobs involve answering questions—your questions. The best way to get answers is to convey to the contact person that you are both allies in the same process. Legal assistants and consultants (just like the management consultant mentioned above) are paid a lot of money to know how to "*schmooze*" fairly ordinary people, such as court clerks, or secretaries, for valuable information. The people who handle schedules and know how things really get done are often the ones who can steer you in the right direction, or open a door to a person with authority.

Value these people, and cultivate their support. It's a wonderful experience to convert openly hostile government or corporate functionaries into your best friends. They may even start calling in favors to help you if you treat them well.

**The Literature Search.** People are not the only resource. In a society as vast as ours, someone, somewhere, has written something that will help answer your question. Learn how to use library catalogs, indexes and directories. Doubtful that you'll get good service? Think of public librarians as prospects, and cultivate them. You'll be amazed just how much information can open up to you.

Librarians' professional finding tools are available to everyone. Go to the reference desk at your library and find out about these resources, because they can be powerful gateways to knowledge and personal contacts. For example, *The Encyclopedia of Associations* will give you complete access to thousands of associations. Many associations, such as the American Association of Retired Persons, have full-time staff whose job it is to know trends, figures, and policy directions. These staff are usually very willing to handle telephone inquiries.

**Secondary Literature: Paths of Gold.** Often, a "primary" document, such as a bill of Congress or statistical findings compiled for scientific reasons, may be more difficult to understand than the commentary about it. Commentary—periodical articles, speeches, books outlining trends—are "secondary" sources. Searching secondary sources can save you lots of time: one good article with footnotes and commentary can lead to more, and fill in blanks in your understanding. Learn to use

directories to periodical literature. If you aren't familiar with these references, look at directories of directories at a central reference desk to get a sense of what's out there.

- **The Online Environment.** Many useful print resources are available as databases, for a fee. Costs can be prohibitive and training is often required, but the motivated researcher can learn how to use some of the online resources that librarians and corporations depend on. An easy start is to try a university public access catalog, such the University of California's MELVYL database, which is free.

University library catalogs are being transformed into gateways to larger groups of databases. MELVYL includes indexes to periodical literature, and the system is planning to add many more. These databases are covered by licenses that limit access to on-campus terminals only, but once you are on campus, there is no charge.

Another source is Dialog Information Service's Knowledge Index, an after hours access program available by modem connection at a rate of \$24 per hour. The offerings include corporate information, encyclopedias, and indexes to business literature.

### Information Literacy: What's to Come?

The American Library Association's information literacy report proclaims a consensus that high school and college students are just not learning basic research. In 1989, the association issued a challenge to educators to teach basic, fact-finding skills that would stay with workers throughout their careers.

Not surprisingly, an increase in information illiteracy coincided with reductions in funding for schools and libraries. A local example of the impact of scarce funds can be seen in the closure of the San Francisco Public Library's downtown Business Library, in the late 1980s. The closure meant that citizen-researchers and small business people had to journey to the main library at the civic center, or subscribe to private business libraries around town. Events like this have a chilling effect everywhere. Life long learners who do not have access to corporate business resources must be much more creative in locating information resources.

Librarians have been debating how best to respond to the research skills deficit during an era of diminished resources for libraries. Tight funds have resulted in reduced hours and the disappearance of bibliographic training from college curricula. As new technologies become essential elements in library services, concern is growing. Large-scale information networks have created new forums and challenges for the computer literate, hastening the pace of change dramatically. The Internet, a worldwide network of computers available to computer users, is now a fixture for scholars. Labor has a presence on the Internet, in PeaceNet and the germinal LaborNet project.

As networks become a normal means of communication between scholars, business people and citizens, information literacy will be more important than ever. The new Democratic administration has voiced support for increased funding of information networks.

The National Research and Education Network (NREN) has been identified as an important agent for boosting productivity and improving education. The NREN is conceived as an information "superhighway" to succeed the Internet and other networks, linking together industrial and educational communications with fiber-optic communications technology.

As Congress debates the extent of the program and its funding, it will be important to make sure we all are part of the plan. During the last session of Congress, secondary school educators lobbied successfully to be added to the NREN profile. The educators realized early on that if they entered the planning process, they would be able to participate in this new technology which could include wireless high-speed information transfer, and interactive multimedia systems linking homes, offices and schools.

### Conclusions

The Information Age does not need to belong solely to those who have deep pocketbooks. Whether you are a union organizer or just a citizen with a variety of concerns and a need to know more, it's never too late to get started as a researcher. If knowledge is power, then those who can find the knowledge, when they need it, are the empowered.

### References

American Library Association. Presidential Committee on Information Literacy. *Final Report*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1989.

*Encyclopedia of Associations*. Detroit: Gale Research Co. Published Annually.

For information about Dialog Information Service's Knowledge Index Service, call 1-(800)-334-2564.

For information about MELVYL call the UC Berkeley Library Information Desk, (510) 643-9999.

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