



Wrong Turn on the Information Superhighway

By Stuart White
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I was arranging a semi business lunch at my home this weekend and had invited someone who needed directions to get there. Now I don't know if everyone is like me but I hardly know any of the road names in the city. I tend to direct people by businesses, landmarks and restaurants so my instructions go something like "pass the circle at the UB, go past the Gabs Sun, turn left into the road that takes you to Northside School, etc. But as the invited guest had only been a few weeks in the country I knew my usual method of instruction would fail dismally. So I asked one colleague what the name of 'that' street was and he wasn't sure, so I asked another. Soon 3 resources were on to it. One colleague was searching Google earth, another was contemplating going to go check the GPS in his car whilst the third was texting her mother for the right answer.

My very practical and somewhat old-school bookkeeper (forgive me Moira) seeing through the high-technology-aided approach asked why we didn't look in the phone book because there are maps of city central there (I didn't honestly know we even had one because I haven't seen anyone use one in the office). She passed it to us and there it was!

I don't have a phone book at home and I am not 100% sure if my children have even seen one, let alone know how to look up a number in it. According to a study nearly 70% of adults in the US "rarely or never" use the phone book. That's because people use the internet to find contact information. Apart from the environmental debate (165 000 tons of waste paper which ends up in rubbish dumps every year) phone books are cumbersome, old-fashioned, and as far as I am concerned as good as dead...even though they may get sporadic use from time to time, I think it's safe to say their days, like their pages, are numbered!

That's just one example of how the world of work has changed and how we respond to the problems and challenges that present themselves. We are now only one or two clicks away from getting an answer to almost any question. There were more than 3 billion searches performed on Google in January of 2009. Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopedic resource written collaboratively by volunteers from all around the world, has become the largest reference website in the world, attracting almost 700 million users in 2008. Today, there are more than 75,000 active contributors working on more than 10 million articles in more than 250 languages. There are more people with blogs today (31 million) than had internet connection 10 years ago. LinkedIn has more than 28 million users each connecting you to almost anyone you want to get to, and helping you uncover who works where, doing what.

One of the ways the business world has changed is the elimination of barriers to entry for most businesses and products. The ability to share information instantly around the world, coupled with the ability to access it, easily means that it is less complicated than ever to start a business and look pretty proficient at it. Want to write a winning proposal – just check it out on the net, pick a sample, copy and paste away. As consultants we used to ferociously protect our intellectual property and 'know how' but now if you search long enough you will find someone willing to tell you what to do and how to do it. It used to be said "where there is mystery there is margin" but the internet has changed all that. All the information you need to fake it and try and make it is there at the click of a mouse.

And this is the dilemma that we as consultants face today. If everyone has access to information from so many sources, how do we differentiate ourselves and show clients which of us really understand it all? Take care! It was Albert Einstein who said information is not knowledge. All the information in the world is useless unless you can use it. It's only when it is analysed and understood that it turns into knowledge and wisdom, qualities that have value in business.

What worries me about this is the way many decisions are made regarding working with consultants. Selecting consultants for assignments is too often done by measuring rather than evaluating the information presented in a proposal. The majority of points scored are for the amount of information provided – yet information without interpretation is merely a superficial collection of facts and figures, not the knowledge and wisdom where critical consulting skills are to be found.

When I receive a CV or any sort of proposal, I work from the premise that it has come from somewhere in cyberspace. A great-looking CV means you have looked on the internet, found one that looks professional enough and used your judgment in choosing that over the multi-coloured resume in fancy font complete with swirly graphics, smilies and a space for your mug shot. The same applies to any proposal or tender documents - look beyond the standardised layout and lifted text blocks to see what has been done with the information available and make an initial assessment in separating out the original thinkers and constructive doers from the copiers, claimants, cowboys and quacks.

There are no shortcuts on the information superhighway because it's more of a maze than a straight road and if you don't have more detailed information in your mental map you'll just end up at a dead end.

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