

## Meeting Report: Business Information on the Internet

### One-day UKeiG course held at University of Warwick Library, 12 July, 2006

As a part-time Subject Librarian for a user group that places a high value on the currency and accuracy of information, one of the main challenges I face is keeping up to date with information sources in my field. With this (and my resources budget) in mind, Karen Blakeman's course on Business Information on the Internet, with its emphasis on pay-as-you-go and free services, seemed a highly attractive proposition.

After reminding us of the highly volatile nature of information found on the Internet, Karen began by looking at several key starting points and portals for business information. Many of these were already very familiar to me – such as Biz/ed (<http://www.bized.ac.uk>), BUBL (<http://www.bubl.ac.uk>) and SOSIG (<http://www.sosig.ac.uk>) – but others were a pleasant surprise. I was unaware, for example, that Yahoo's finance section (<http://uk.finance.yahoo.com/>), although sometimes charging for information, nonetheless provides free access to historical share prices dating back five years, which can be downloaded to a spreadsheet.

Moving on to company data, Karen gave us some helpful background information to inform our searching. The amount of information available on a company can depend not only on its type (stock exchange listed, limited liability, private, partnership or sole trader), but also on the disclosure requirements of particular countries. Whereas it is relatively easy to find information on the first of these types of company (the 'big boys'), it can be impossible to find information on the other four. We were also warned not to trust a company's financial information unless it had been filed officially. Another quirk of financial reporting (this time in the USA), which amused me, is that when a company is labeled as 'foreign', it can simply mean that it is operating in another state. Karen has an extensive list of official company registers at <http://www.rba.co.uk/sources/registers.htm>, organized by country and by state. We also looked at Euroinfopool (<http://www.euroinfopool.com>), a priced service which provides information and credit reports on 18 million European companies in 15 European countries.

Karen then moved on to directories and direct marketing resources, reminding us that "there is no such thing as a comprehensive directory". Directories can be used to find information on smaller companies, although their coverage must be checked (they may be industry- or country-specific, or they may be limited to members of a trade association, or to advertisers). Again, Karen has a full list of directories on her website (<http://www.rba.co.uk/sources/directs.htm>), as does Yahoo ([http://uk.dir.yahoo.com/business\\_and\\_economy/directories/](http://uk.dir.yahoo.com/business_and_economy/directories/)). She also pointed us in the

direction of FreeDirectories (<http://www.freedirectories.com>), where you can search by keyword, industry, country, or general interest to find free directories or databases.

The next section on news, alerts, blogs and RSS was really interesting and certainly kept us all awake after our delicious lunch (thanks must go to Christine Baker for successfully accommodating all our dietary requirements!). Again, some words of caution from Karen regarding news sources. Firstly, although company websites are often a good source of news items, they are most likely to be biased, hence the need to consult independent news sources as well. Secondly, although most newspapers are on the Web, many lack an archive or satisfactory searching facilities. Three sites were suggested for locating the Web version of a newspaper or magazine: Abyz News Links (<http://www.abyznewslinks.com>), Online Newspapers (<http://www.onlinenewspapers.com>) and Journalism UK (<http://www.journalismuk.co.uk>). Sources for trade publications were also discussed, as were well-known multi-source services, such as BBC News (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/>), Yahoo News (<http://www.yahoo.com>), which claims to cover around 7,500 sources, and (perhaps) lesser known services such as Accoona News (<http://www.accoona.com>). Karen went on to discuss the benefits of using RSS instead of e-mail: it reduces in-box overload; it is easy to scan headlines and decide on relevance; you can unsubscribe yourself, and the user has more control over content). We were then taught how to set one up. This led smoothly on to a discussion of 'blogs' and how industry blogs, particularly those set up by 'industry gurus', can provide valuable insights into a particular sector.

The last section of the course dealt with statistics and market research. A key starting point was shown to be Official Statistics on the Web (<http://www.library.auckland.ac.nz/subjects/stats/offstats/>), along with Market Research on the Web (<http://www.marketresearchontheweb.com>), a subscription service that is available at a discount to CILIP members. Free market research, government reports and content aggregators were discussed, and we were then given some useful tips on how to search effectively for market research using Google or Yahoo's advanced search screens (for example, include brand names in your search, and limit your search to a type of organisation or to a specific document format).

As I'm sure will be apparent from this report, I really appreciated the intelligent comments made by Karen, in an attempt to help us assess and evaluate the sources being discussed (which was one of her stated aims). It was also very helpful to have practical sessions throughout the day when we could test out the sources for ourselves (as we all know, this is impossible during the average working day). Karen Blakeman is undoubtedly passionate about her chosen field, and this came across repeatedly throughout the session. In fact, she was still passionately promoting sources when the rest of us were drooping with heat and information overload at the end of a very enjoyable and useful day.

[Karen Blakeman's website can be found at <http://www.rba.co.uk>]

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