



Did you know...

"Free" IT Info is Costing You a Bundle!

The IT profession has been around long enough that it's finally collected some traditions... including a few that need to be debunked and retired!

One of the most common IT "sacred cows" is the belief that "...I'll just surf the Web and find the answer I need..." Closely related to this is belief that a fully-loaded bookshelf will do the trick. Wrong on both counts. If productivity and ROI matter to you, then you've got to wake up and smell the coffee - limiting yourself to just these methods may be costing you and your team a bundle in expense dollars and lost productivity!

The simple act of adding online IT books to your process can dramatically lower the cost of finding the IT answers you need. Let's take a closer look.

IT needs Information, too!

IT professionals have a real hunger and need for information. In order to deliver effective Information Technology solutions, we need constant access to mountains of technical information. Plus, to keep our training up-to-date, we need to constantly refresh ourselves on the state of the art. This need for info means that to be fully productive, we need to be very efficient at finding, absorbing and sharing our technical information. Unfortunately, not many IT professionals get formal training in this area, and most IT managers don't have data on the hidden costs of information acquisition.

Let's look at how most of us are finding technical information today. It's familiar, but not often very efficient...

What's your favorite "flavor" of information?

Technical information comes in two basic flavors: "authoritative" and "anecdotal."

Authoritative information has great practical value, because it is generated by recognized experts and is distilled by passing through a rigorous and formal publishing process before it reaches us.

Anecdotal information generally comes from sources we can't easily evaluate, and is often fragmentary or unproven. This is not to say that this information is wrong -- it's just that the quality of this information is unclear, and it often isn't presented in a user-friendly format.

As a rule of thumb, technical books and publications are authoritative. The vast

sea of free-form information on the Web is usually anecdotal. Both have their value to IT pros, but knowing when and how to use them is critical.

The three channels of technical information

Let's examine the three primary channels for acquiring technical information:

1) **Books in print.** This is the traditional and still most popular way of acquiring authoritative IT info. After all, print has served civilization well for hundreds of years, and most IT teams have made significant investments in their print libraries, both for reference and training purposes.

2) **Books online.** Authoritative technical content is now becoming available for online viewing and digital delivery. Very often this is the same content as books in print, but with several very important differences -- online IT content can be instantly accessed, easily searched, and seamlessly shared amongst IT team members.

3) **Free-form Web searches.** This is the popular habit of surfing the Web, searching for technical information and solutions. The Web offers many terabytes of "free" information, but most of it is unqualified, fragmentary or anecdotal -- newsgroup postings, online forums, special interest websites, et al.

Let's look at the key characteristics of each channel

	PRINT books	ONLINE books (ITK.com)	WEB searches
Quantity of IT titles	5,000+ est.	1,000+ most popular & current	Few complete books
Quality of IT content	Authoritative	Authoritative	Highly variable, often anecdotal and fragmentary
"Freshness" of content:	Fair	Excellent	Highly variable
Time to locate specific IT title or topic:	Medium	Fast (full-text searches of titles and books)	Highly variable; must sift through many irrelevant search engine hits or newsgroup postings
Probability of finding relevant information	High	Medium-to-High	Low
Skills needed for probable success:	Simple search skills	Simple search skills	Advanced search skills
Content delivery method:	Ground shipment	Digital	Digital
Time to access content:	Highly variable -- travel time for bookstore pickup, otherwise ground delivery time	Instantaneous	Instantaneous

Potential for tangents:	Low	Low	High
Hardcopy available?	Always	Printout as needed	Printout as needed

How do we use these channels?

How do most IT pros find the information they need? Unfortunately, we're not as efficient as we could be...

In our informal survey, **72% of IT pros said they relied on books in print as a primary source of technical reference and training.** However, many of these same people expressed frustration over the time lost in acquiring the information in these books -- locating the books, evaluating their content, and taking delivery of the book. Others were frustrated that these books had a short shelf life -- a new technology release would often obsolete the reference books on the shelf.

21% of the people in our survey said the Web was their primary source of IT information and solutions. However, very few of them could quantify the time spent surfing the Web for answers. Also, most agreed with the statement that "...free Web-based IT resources often do not have the answers I need..."

Only 7% of our respondents said they relied on online books for their technical solutions. Most were quite pleased with the fast and easy access to information, but some expressed frustration at not being able to find the specific titles they wanted.

The search habits of highly-effective IT pros

Some of the people we surveyed were considered "IT heroes" by their teammates, mostly for their ability to come up with quick solutions to their technical challenges. Being considered an IT hero is a complex mix of factors (training, personality, the level of challenge, etc.), but our interviewer noticed that these people often had one trait in common:

IT heroes consistently apply the "80:20" principle when it comes to information searches. That is, they start their search for answers by going to the resource that historically takes the least time while offering a high probability of a solution. If that resource draws a blank, the searcher moves on to the next most productive resource, and so on. Thus, the rule of thumb is that 80% of their solutions come from 20% of their resources. Common sense, eh? But as a wit once observed, "common sense isn't." So how can we apply the 80:20 principle to our search for technical solutions? And what are the true costs of using the three channels we've discussed...?

A Quick 'n' Dirty ROI Analysis

As this title suggests, we're going to take a quick and casual look at the costs and productivity of our technical info channels. Your actual costs will certainly be different, due to the unique factors in your organization. So let's walk through the logic of this example, and feel free to plug in your own numbers.

First, some assumptions:

- 1) In our informal survey, **reliance on print books was the common element** for virtually all respondents. Therefore, the primary variables in our ROI analysis will be "online books" and "Web searches."
- 2) Each channel has **usage costs** associated with it, based on its direct and "hidden" expenses. We'll use our best 'guestimates'; your mileage may vary.
- 3) On average, an IT pro will need regular access to a minimum of **5 printed books a year** (reference and/or training books, new or updated titles).
- 4) The **average IT book costs \$37** (the average cost of the top 25 bestsellers on Fatbrain.com, for the week of 9/13/99).
- 5) To **estimate the total costs** (direct + hidden), we'll apply the 80:20 principle to the three search habits we saw in our informal survey:
 - Try **print** books first (80%), followed by a Web search (20%)
 - Try **online** books first (60%), followed by print books (30%), then the Web (10%)
 - Try the **Web** first (80%), followed by print books (20%)
- 6) As our example of online books, we'll use the pricing for **ITKnowledge.com**, the largest online collection of IT books.

Let's plug in these assumptions...

Method	Weighting	Direct Costs	Hidden Costs	Weighted Cost	Total Cost of Method
Print Method					
1) Print *	80%	\$185	\$250	\$348	
2) Web**	20%	\$0	\$1,000	\$200	\$548
Online Method					
1) Online***	60%	\$195	\$0	\$117	
2) Print *	30%	\$185	\$250	\$131	
3) Web **	10%	\$0	\$1,000	\$100	\$348
Web Method					
1) Web **	80%	\$0	\$1,000	\$800	
2) Print *	20%	\$185	\$250	\$87	\$887

* PRINT assumptions:

DIRECT costs - 5 books/year @ \$37/book = \$185
 HIDDEN costs - 5 hours/year @ \$50/hour for online or bookstore searching, evaluating and ordering. (NOTE: this does NOT include time lost waiting for book delivery or other print-related delays.)

** WEB assumptions:

DIRECT costs - \$0 ("free") for public access websites
 HIDDEN costs - 20 hours/year @ \$50/hour for use of search engines, site navigation, reading/evaluation of newsgroup

postings, sending of e-mail, followup, etc. "General surfing."

*** ONLINE book assumptions:

DIRECT costs - \$195/year (or less) per user for unlimited access to 1,000+ books on ITKnowledge.com

HIDDEN costs - \$0 (no significant time lost searching for or accessing content.)

What does it all mean?

Adding online books to the mix dramatically lowers the overall cost of accessing mission-critical IT information -- it helps IT pros find answers faster and surf less. And remember, the assumptions in this scenario are conservative -- most IT pros spend much more than 20 hours/year fruitlessly surfing the Web in search of answers.

Additionally, with access to online books, your expenditures on print books should actually shrink... no need to buy the latest edition of a reference manual when you can access it online, at no additional cost. Plus, the bookcase won't be loaded down with as many copies of obsolete print books... how many copies of Windows 3.1 references have you personally sent to the dumpster?!

Don't forget the intangibles...

A successful IT team knows how to collaborate. With online books, collaboration takes a big step forward: New knowledge can be instantly shared among team members. Code fragments can be copied and pasted from source books, without manual re-entry. Plus, there's the freedom from nagging annoyances: "I can't answer that now, because I've got the reference book at home..." or "Our book budget is maxed-out, so see if you can find the answer elsewhere..."

Every day, dozens of intangibles block our progress on our IT projects. Online books aren't a cure-all, but they certainly deliver more "right answers, right now" than we're used to... and for IT professionals, that's the name of the game.
