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Information need and information seeking behavior of professionals at an Iranian company

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the results of an investigation of information seeking behavior and needs conducted at Irankhodro Axle Manufacture Company in Iran, examining professional factors in information behaviors. The study's questionnaire is designed to examine the role of the library and the role of librarians in the searching process. Recommendations are given for improving information seeking behaviors in similar companies.

In this brief overview, we present the findings of our investigation, conducted at Irankhodro Axle Manufacture Company in Iran, into the professional factors affecting information needs, information seeking behavior, and library usage of engineers, social scientists, and accountants of the company. We also examine the role of new information

environments in the information seeking process and make recommendations based on our findings.

Background

Over the last several years, the number of information resources has increased considerably. The emergence of new information environments, sources, and channels, especially the World Wide Web, regardless of the advantages, has brought new challenges and problems. On one hand, the retrieval of information in response to users' real needs has become ever more complex; on the other hand, assessing the validity and reliability of retrieved information is a considerable problem. According to EMC Corporation's findings in a recent study (2007), the 2006 digital universe was 161 billion gigabytes (161 exabytes) in size. They also have forecasted a six-fold annual information growth from 2006 to 2010. In this situation, the so-called information explosion feels quite real. Hence, it seems necessary to discern the real information needs of all groups of users and to identify efficient information seeking behaviors.

Subject group

Irankhodro Axle Manufacture Company, located in Tehran, is a subsidiary of Irankhodro Group. The company's main products include axles, components, and spare parts of light vehicles (mainly Peugeot group). Our subject group consists of engineers and experts of professional units and departments of the company, including Quality Control, Industrial Engineering, Production, Training, Accounting and Financial, IT, Human Resources, Trade, and Research and Development. From these groups, 130 users took part in the study. Participants' education levels varied in range from Bachelor's degree to Master's degree. Their activities in different units and departments of the company are mainly related to their education backgrounds. Based on the occupation and education of the participants, we divided them into three major disciplinary groups: Engineering, Accounting and Trade, and Social Science.

Problem statement

Our questionnaire asked our subject group: their preferences in choosing information resources and the periods during which such information is valuable for their profession; whether or not their information resources provide them with updated and new information; the level of their comfort and familiarity with networked environments, such as the Internet; and, the frequency of using library resources. According to our results and analysis of the completed questionnaires we were able to make several suggestions for improving information services.

Backgrounds and definitions

The term information seeking behavior has been used in the research literature since the

1950's (Hayden, 1999). Thereafter it took several decades for the subject to be presented as a major field of study. Some of the most important studies of information behavior include: Ellis' (1989) behavioral model of information searching strategies, Kuhlthau's (1993) information search process, and Wilson's (1997) problem-solving model.

It might be useful to explain the terms information, information need, information seeking, and information seeking behavior a bit further. The Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science defined information as: "Data presented in readily comprehensible form to which meaning has been attributed within the context of its use" (Reitz, 2004). So a specific data can be considered as information if it conveys a meaning to the person who receives it. Over time the term information need has been used in a variety of ways. Belkin and Croft (1992) suggest that a search begins with a problem and a need to solve it—the gap between these is defined as the information needs. Information need, then, leads to information seeking.

According to Wiberley and Jones (1989), information seeking is a basic activity in which all people participate, manifest through particular behaviors. It is of most interest to librarians in the areas of collection development, services, and organizational structures (Wiberley & Jones, 1989). It follows that information seeking behavior is, as Wilson (1999) defines it, "those activities a person may engage in when identifying their own needs for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information" (¶ 1).

Results of our study

Our results indicate that there are considerable differences in the information needs and information seeking behavior of those in the categories of Social Science and Engineering. In contrast, there are many similarities in information seeking behavior of those in the categories of Social Science and Accounting and Trade. Within groups, those in the category of Engineering showed stronger similarities in information needs and behavior than in the other two groups.

For the Engineering group, the information resources available in the various departments were not adequately updated. Although they can obtain more updated resources in the network environments, they showed less use of these resources and preferred printed materials. On the other hand, Social Science and Accounting and Trade experts tended to use network resources (especially Internet). They were found, nonetheless, to be considerably less skilled in using electronic resources.

The Social Science experts did not stress the importance of newness of resources, possibly because of the nature of their discipline. The Engineers, however, placed the greatest importance on the age of the material: information resources older than 10 months were considered less valuable for their projects, and they preferred that resources be updated every six months. Those in the Accounting and Trade group claimed that all resources are equally valuable independent of their age.

Among the three groups, library usage for Accounting and Trade experts was found to be the least, while the referring rate of Engineering and Social Science experts to the library was approximately equal. Library usage of Engineering experts was found to vary greatly and was related to their occupational activities.

Conclusions

Our literature review revealed that ours is one of the first information seeking studies conducted at an industrial site in Iran (a recent study by Bigdeli, 2007, is another). This might, then, be a good starting point for further discussion of the information needs of Iranian industrial companies.

This study examined the acquaintance of the company's professionals with the information seeking process. Their knowledge of their own information needs and the searching process was found to be insufficient to meet their real needs. This study demonstrates that there are enough resources accessible to the personnel, but their discontent about information resources are due to their unfamiliarity with information seeking skills.

We have, in conclusion, three suggestions to fix the gap in information need and information seeking behavior: first, the Training Unit of the company should implement necessary courses for personnel instruction in relevant fields; second, main researchers of each department can cooperatively work with or alongside librarians; third, librarians should provide specific information seeking skill instruction for each department related to their careers and professional activities.

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