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HOW TO GET INFORMATION

FEW top executives try to carry in their heads all the facts they need in the course of a day's work. They know it isn't what a man remembers that matters, but what he can find out.

The person seeking information is often surprised by the ease with which it can be found. There are many sources, and the people in charge of them have the greatest goodwill toward inquirers who have kindred interests.

Because most of the truths learned by mankind will be found in printed matter of one sort or another, this Monthly Letter will be concerned with literature as a source of information. It is in literature that the concrete experiences and the outlook of humanity receive their expression. We are not concerned with book criticism, trying to appraise what is creditable to the author, but are trying to give some little guidance to what will be profitable to the reader.

No one need apologize for having to look things up. The world is constantly changing, with new ideas crowding upon the heels of new facts. Things that were important ten or twenty years ago recede in relative significance, and things unheard of then — even unthought of — usurp their place in our lives. We need to supplement our knowledge along certain lines that are of special importance to us, and in other lines we should know where and how to learn what we find it necessary to refer to from time to time.

Starting to Search

Every person who has occasion to seek information frequently will develop his own methods, but there are some general procedures about which everyone should know. The more systematic a search, the more likely it will be to yield bonus results.

When approaching a subject that is quite new to the searcher, it is well to read a general article about it in an encyclopedia or some other book of reference. This provides the bird's-eye view from which to select particular parts for detailed search. It also gives the reader a rough idea of the language and terms used, so that he will better understand what he reads later. It will give him the words to be looked for in indexes.

Go first to the books that are most accessible, those in your own and in the office library, then to those in the nearest public library, and if further pursuit is necessary, to private libraries and publishers. Alongside this precept may be placed a second: work from the most likely source to the least likely.

The early part of the search is relatively simple, but thereafter one of two paths must be chosen. As the more obvious gaps are filled, it may be necessary to discriminate more carefully so as not to be lured into side paths, or, if the gaps do not fill in it may be necessary to dig deeper, to discover more words and ideas to follow as guides.

Lionel McColvin, chief librarian of the City of Westminster, has written a book called *How to Find Out*. In it he suggests that the seeker of information should decide what is the subject of his inquiry and to what branch of knowledge it belongs, and then go on to define it as closely as possible.

Suppose you wish to write an appreciation of heating plants today compared with those of earlier days. The all-embracing catch-word is "engineering". A subdivision will be "heating", and this in turn will be broken down into various classes of which "boilers" will be one and "furnaces" another. "Furnaces" will include many types, such as those using gas, coal, electricity and oil. An analysis like this eliminates a mass of irrelevant material and at the same time discloses the field that must be examined.

Public and special libraries in Canada generally use a system of cataloguing that brings related books together on the shelves. The librarian, given an array of catch words and an objective, can produce in a few minutes the best books to meet any specific need.

Know What You Want

There is a better way of exploring than merely fumbling around an ocean in the hope of hitting a continent.

Essential to efficient search is knowledge of exactly what is wanted, and what for. Librarians and others whose job it is to find information for executives know

all too well the difficulty of doing an expert job with inadequate briefing. Many inquirers, for some unknown reason, are reluctant to disclose their precise needs, or they credit one with the ability to read their minds. It will pay librarians, secretaries, and others who do research for executives, to coax out of them sufficient briefing to enable a good job to be done.

Executives, too, will find it advantageous to take the time and trouble to go into some detail about their needs, telling exactly what it is they want to know. Not only will they assure themselves of getting more complete and more enlightened answers, but they will prevent the extravagant waste of energy represented in their subordinates' efforts to find the answers to vague questions.

Suppose an executive asks his secretary or a librarian for figures showing the money supply in Canada in a recent month and in 1914: he will be given two figures which are practically meaningless, \$9,409 million and \$1,136 million. Both the population and the value of money have changed in these forty years, so that the gross comparison has little significance. If he asked for figures showing the money supply per capita in dollars of equal value he would be given a meaningful comparison: \$553 and \$290.

To ask questions for himself or others to answer should be second nature to the research-minded person. No one solves a problem until he knows that one exists, and only the faculty of asking questions will reveal that. Charles Steinmetz, wizard of the C.G.E., is quoted as saying: "There are no foolish questions and no man becomes a fool until he has stopped asking questions." All discoveries of truth, whether truth in business facts or in philosophy, are reached by people with a questioning turn of mind going round and round items of information in ever-narrowing circles.

Using A Library

No efficient information service can exist without a working library. A library devoted to distributing novels and uplift books would not contribute so much as a powerful platitude toward increased production or higher sales, but a working library brings vast human knowledge and experience to those who wish for them and are imaginative enough and energetic enough to reach out for them.

One does not have to be a trained librarian to use the wealth of a library in an advantageous manner, but one should know enough about it to guide the librarian intelligently toward finding what one wants. A walk around the stacks in the firm's library or in a public library, accompanied by the librarian, will reveal the width and scope of what is available. Those shelves hold the symbols that stand for almost everything we know about the universe.

The observer with a curious bent of mind must be struck by the great difference in quantity in the various sections of literature. When we contemplate the immense number of books in the science and econo-

mics sections we realize the need for sharpening our inquiries so as to find answers to exact problems. One man who didn't know the detail with which some subjects are written about gave his bookseller an order for a copy of every book in any language dealing with Napoleon. The first instalment, says Conan Doyle in *Through the Magic Door*, was 40,000 volumes.

Special Libraries

A special library is a service organized to make available all experience and knowledge that will further the activities and common objectives of an organization or group, such as an industrial concern, a university, a profession, etcetera. It is staffed by persons who, in addition to their professional library training, have acquired knowledge of the activities served by the library. The slogan of the Special Libraries Association is "putting knowledge to work."

The special library is the veritable heart of all research activity. In business as in science the library is not merely a repository of books but a creative participant in research and product development, full of life and vitality.

Books, periodicals, newspapers, pictures and atlases, form the basic materials of most library collections, but because of the rapidly-changing face of nature and of business special libraries also shelve mimeographed and other processed reports, clippings, circulars, letters, speeches — anything, indeed, which gives information about the special interests of the organizations served by the libraries.

Thus, when a report on railroads is in hand, the writer will draw upon the special library for books telling the history and development of railroads in general and in his territory, the invention of methods of transportation, the problems of transportation involving technology, economics, geography, and politics, and the contribution railroads have made to the industrial progress of nations.

He will refer to government year-books and periodical reports for the statistical data he needs, to company reports for details of capitalization, costs and profits and to industrial association reports for an outside appraisal of railroad operations. Then, because what makes its way into books and formal reports is frequently out of date even before it is printed, the writer will consult newspapers and mimeographed sheets for the latest opinions and comment and news given by officials of the railroads, the government and other interested parties.

The privilege of turning for all this material to an adequate and well-planned library, staffed by efficient people, is a blessing to any executive. There should be some library, large or small according to need, in every office and workshop. Even the smallest office needs dictionaries, gazetteers, standard textbooks on the business, trade directories, and so on.

Special librarians are known to be optimists, but their optimism is based solidly upon their experience that there is hardly anything in any field of human

interest on which they cannot turn up at least a partial answer on some written or printed page.

Nature of Resources

Foremost among reference books are encyclopedias and dictionaries. The fore-runner of modern English encyclopedias was that of Ephraim Chambers, whose two volumes published in 1728 were translated into French and provided a model for the great 35 volume *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert.

Chambers invented the system of cross-references now so widely used, to take the reader from place to place where information could be found in his books. This is a device that should have the attention of everyone seeking complete data. Most encyclopedias give the bulk of their information under the most specific heading possible, but they will refer to the larger theme of which it may be a part and to related topics.

It seems simplicity itself to find a word in a list that is arranged alphabetically, but there are pitfalls which can be avoided by making oneself acquainted with the sort of alphabetization employed in the particular books being used. For example, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has, in this order: Bank (a card game); Bank (with references to Banks, History, etc.); Banka (an island); Bank Acceptances; Bank Account; Bank Balance; Bank Charter Act; Banker; Banker Marks (stone-cutters' symbols); Bankhead Highway; Bank Holidays; Banking and Credit; and then, several pages further along, Bank of England, and, following biographies of several persons named "Banks", a long article on Banks, History of.

Dictionaries that are adequate for everyday reference can be obtained in vest-pocket size, and they range upward to sets of several big volumes. Hours of labour and much misunderstanding may be avoided by paying attention to the page or pages telling how the dictionary is arranged and what the abbreviations mean.

A language dictionary (there are many other sorts, as we shall see) is not a language lawmaker, but a record of the practice in speech and writing of intelligent people of the present time. For rules and style one must go to books of grammar, or to school texts such as H. W. Brown's *Creative English*, or to the Emily Post of literature, H. W. Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*.

Dictionaries of synonyms and antonyms — words of like and opposite meaning — are handy for the person who wishes to brighten his letters or his reports by avoiding clumsy repetition. One volume is devoted to the word "very", for which it provides about 7,000 substitutes. Another has 1,300 pages of verbs, adverbs and adjectives with which to give wings to our writing.

There are rhyming dictionaries for poets; dictionaries of quotations (covering a wide range, such as Bartlett's, or a single author, as in the Everyman

Shakespeare); dictionaries of places, of dates, of people, of abbreviations, of mythology, and, in fact, almost every item within the range of man's thought and activity. Science, engineering, chemistry, commerce, economics, psychology, law, music, medicine, printing, physics, sociology — every one has its own special dictionary. There are dictionaries of proverbs, epigrams, slang, obsolete words and anecdotes. Hobbyists like stamp collectors and gardeners have dictionaries available to them. There is a dictionary of occupational titles, containing definitions of job titles with descriptions of the duties involved in the different jobs. There are several indexes to the Bible, giving chapter and verse references for thousands of words and phrases. And, of course, there are dictionaries designed to show the words of equivalent meaning in two or more languages. There is a dictionary of engineering and industrial science in seven languages.

Directories

Nearly everyone has a directory of some sort: telephone, city, etc. Business or trade directories serve as sources of information in each type of enterprise covered, giving information about buyers, sellers, changes in operation, new products, and data that can be presented statistically. The *Canada Trade Index* (annual, Canadian Manufacturers' Association, Inc., Toronto) lists about 10,000 Canadian manufacturers with addresses, branches, export representatives, trade marks and brands, and a wealth of related information.

Corporation directories tell in detail about the operations of business enterprises and government units which offer opportunities for investment. A directory of directors lists members of the boards of Canadian businesses.

There are several directories giving information about current publicity media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television. They tell publication dates and deadlines, sizes of pages, circulation, advertising rates, and all else needed by the buyer of publicity.

Reference Books

Besides encyclopedias and directories there are many other reference books which are storehouses of information in which items may be found with a minimum of trouble. It has been said that if you give an intelligent man an encyclopedia, an almanac and a time-table he need never be bored.

It is interesting, and rewarding, to thumb through reference books just to see what is in them. Many dictionaries have lists of proper names, foreign phrases, and synonyms. A search will reveal information you do not expect to find within such austere covers, such as lists of wedding anniversaries, the language of flowers, and forms of address.

Almanacs, such as the *Canadian Almanac*, contain all you would expect to find in such books, like the time of the rising and setting of the sun, lists of members of parliament, names of associations and

their officers, university and school lists, names of post offices, and so forth, but they also answer your questions about weights and measures, what railway a town is on, who is clerk of any municipality in Canada, and the customs tariff on any article you contemplate bringing into the country. Only scrutiny of the thousand and one things covered by an almanac will reveal what a treasury of information it is.

Nearly every country has a year-book. *The Canada Year Book* (The Queen's Printer, Ottawa) has 1,324 pages in its 1954 issue, and the index extends over 26 pages with about 4,000 entries ranging from "Aborigines" to "Zinc". It has chapters devoted to giving facts about every facet of Canadian life and activity.

In addition to the comprehensive biographical records of the *Who's Who* type there are books confined to listing prominent people in particular professions and businesses. These tell the career, appointments, publications, and affiliations of men and women, living and dead.

Periodicals

Reference books are not enough. We need to look forward as well as backward. What is in process of happening now? What difference does it make to business or life if it is happening?

Rapid changes in the economic world have placed new importance upon periodicals. Business magazines, with their up-to-the-minute data and current statistics constitute one of the most alive elements of business literature.

A library is judged not alone by the presence of appropriate titles on its magazine list, but by the efficiency of the methods used in their servicing. In some organizations the librarian scans periodicals as they come in, and writes the page numbers of the articles of interest to each officer of the staff against his name on a printed circulation sheet. In others there is a special staff, acquainted with the immediate interests of the officers, to cull articles of significance.

To locate an article in a periodical it is helpful to use one of the published indexes giving the name of the author, the title of the article, the date, volume number and pages of the periodical, and sometimes an abstract. These indexes, one or more of which can be found in most libraries, are published monthly and collated quarterly, semi-annually and annually. There are special indexes for agriculture, industrial arts, education, law, drama, engineering, architecture, and so forth.

A file of newspapers is useful in many offices, particularly if they are newspapers that publish indexes periodically. Newspaper libraries usually are willing to look up items, and some have copied their past issues on microfilm, thus making a search of the files quick and easy.

Pamphlets and Booklets

Accurate and up-to-date information on hundreds of topics is given in government publications, issued by federal, provincial and municipal bodies. In *Canada*

Year Book 1954 there is a quick-reference guide to sources of official information, federal and provincial. The subjects are grouped under 112 headings, ranging from "Agriculture" to "Workmen's Compensation".

The Queen's Printer, Ottawa, issues a monthly catalogue of all federal government publications. A *Reference Paper* (No. 67, issued by the Information Division of the Department of External Affairs, Ottawa) gives 14 pages of government and non-government sources of information about Canada. It tells the nature of each publication and the address to which to write for copies. Provincial government publications may be obtained from the Queen's Printer in the capital city of the province concerned.

Business houses and industries, too, issue pamphlets which provide valuable information. Some companies issue regular trade journals, others distribute advertising literature which contains technical information concerning their products, and others publish house organs.

Additional to all these are the "services" which analyse conditions in business, financial and scientific fields, and provide abstracts. Market surveys combine statistical and other data so as to make it possible to deduce potential demand for various products. Trade and commercial associations will answer inquiries on matters relating to their sphere of activity. Abstracting journals which collect together and make abstracts of information published on particular subjects are of special importance in the scientific world. Valuable information is to be had in the reports of learned and scientific societies and in the publications of research foundations. Much potentially valuable material appears in doctoral dissertations written by candidates for degrees in universities. Certain magazines and indexes list these unpublished works, and some institutions provide abstracts. Museums are treasuries of scientific, artistic and historical information. And, finally, a personal inquiry addressed to a person who is expert in the subject being investigated will often bring the required information.

The Spirit of Inquiry

These are some of the sources of information. To make the best use of them, there are two habits of childhood which we would do well to retain as we grow older: curiosity and observation.

Those who succeed in maintaining a lively spirit of inquiry find it rewarding in more ways than one. Besides acquiring knowledge through research, they increase their understanding, and they find joy in the search itself.

It might be a good thing for us to create needs for information where none naturally exist. It is astonishing how interesting even the simplest job can become when we start asking questions about it.

Even if the answers to our questions do not turn out to be what we expected, or if the object we sought ceases to have any point in the new situation we uncover, no true values have been destroyed or impaired by learning the truth about them.