
Sources of information, formal and informal

David Kaye

The author

David Kaye is Principal Lecturer in the Department of Library and Information Studies, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.

Abstract

Discusses the classification of information sources, by format, status and location. Proposes a typology which plots the formal/informal dimension against the personal/impersonal. The resulting matrix provides a framework for conceptualizing the totality of the complex network of sources available to the information seeker in business. Presents and discusses examples of sources from each quadrant of the matrix. Concludes with a brief introduction to newer modes of information access, with particular reference to the Internet. Forms an introduction to the more detailed consideration of formal sources in later articles of this issue.

The previous article examined the kinds of information sought by managers and the ways in which they use it. This issue of *Library Management* is largely concerned with the sources of this information. Our main purpose is to provide a guide to formal published sources, both print and electronic, but some consideration of alternative sources is also called for. Accordingly, this article will begin with an overview of all types of information sources, followed by a discussion of informal sources of information and other alternatives to formal publications.

A typology of information sources

The following shows the main ways which have been proposed for classifying information sources, arranged by format, status and location:

- (1) Format:
 - Oral vs. Documentary.
 - Textual vs. Audio-visual/multimedia.
 - Paper-based vs. Electronic.
- (2) Status:
 - Personal vs. Impersonal.
 - Formal vs. Informal.
 - Published/open vs. Unpublished/confidential/secret.
- (3) Location:
 - Internal vs. External.

The meanings of most terms are obvious, but two of the pairs call for comment. Personal sources are those which deliver information to the individual manager, whereas impersonal sources communicate to groups or wide audiences, usually through some formal system. A manager's personal sources include organizational colleagues, superiors and subordinates; and external professional and other contacts. Impersonal sources include published books, newspapers and journals, radio and TV broadcasts, the company's annual report and accounts, and in-house computerized management information systems. Formal sources may be defined as those which are constituted in some regularized or legal manner in relation to the user, whereas informal sources have no such basis. Formal sources are often also impersonal, and informal sources are likewise often personal; and so at first sight the pairs informal-personal and formal-impersonal seem to be synonymous, but this is not necessarily so. For example, a government official might be a personal

source of information for a given manager. A piece of information or advice provided by that official could be given orally off the record, in which case it could be considered to be informal; or alternatively it could be given in writing, stating the official position or decision, in which case it would be formal. We may deduce that a source of information could well change its status in relation to the recipient according to circumstances. Likewise, a manager's subordinates and superiors, though personal sources, also have formal status in relation to the manager.

This analysis suggests that some of the categories which have been proposed for classifying sources are less useful than others. It does, however, serve to show that sources of information exhibit complex combinations of features and are not easily pigeon-holed. What is important is the way in which the recipient of information perceives a source in the context in which the information is supplied. A manager may use information only if he/she finds it relevant, timely and accurate and if the source is seen to be reliable. Indeed, the evaluation of relevance and accuracy may depend largely on the perceived reliability of the source. The assessment of source reliability will in turn depend very much on the manager's perception of and attitude towards the status, format and location of the source. If a manager has found a particular official to be reliable in the past, he/she may well feel confident about any new information coming from that individual. Yet that confidence may vary considerably according to which "hat" the official is wearing. The manager might be disposed to rate highly an informal statement made off the record, whereas a formal letter from the same person could be discounted or even disbelieved.

Informal and alternative sources

As noted above, this publication deals mainly with external, formal, published sources of information, whether print-on-paper or electronic. The remainder of this article gives some account of alternative sources available to the manager.

Common experience and the results of numerous research studies show quite clearly that managers, and indeed all seekers of information, frequently prefer personal and informal contacts and sources to published documents and formal sources generally. The

reasons are well understood. A knowledgeable friend or colleague will often provide, not only the facts requested, but also advice, encouragement and moral support. He or she may be able to evaluate the information supplied, indicate the best choice where there are options, relate the information to the enquirer's needs and situation, and support the enquirer's action or decision.

Many such personal contacts will of course be found within the manager's own organization, which is for many people the prime source of facts, knowledge and expertise. As was pointed out in the previous article, any organization is a complex information-processing system in which actions and decisions are underpinned by an array of oral and written instructions, reports, regulations, information and advice. Accordingly, many managers seldom look beyond the organization's boundaries in their search for information; unfortunately this may sometimes be extremely damaging.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the many types of information sources which may be available to the manager. The figure plots the formal/informal dimension against the external/internal, to form four quadrants. This arrangement may be found useful as a framework for grasping the totality of the complex network of sources available to the information seeker. It also serves to underline the point that "information sources" are not confined to those normally thought of under that label, but in fact range over a very wide field. Space does not permit a detailed consideration of every item, but the following comments may be helpful.

Quadrant A – external/informal

Managers often attach great importance to news, ideas and gossip picked up in the course of business dealings or at conferences and trade shows. Sales and technical representatives are frequent recipients of such information because of the nature of their work, which brings them into contact with many organizations and people. Information acquired in this way may be valued even more highly if the recipient perceives that few people are in possession of it or that it is supplied in confidence. These contacts are not confined to business and professional sectors; research has shown that many people rely on family, friends and social acquaintances as their primary source of information and advice.

Figure 1 Types of information sources available to managers

| | Informal | Formal |
|----------|---|---|
| External | A Trade contacts Personal advisers (financial, legal, etc.) Professional associates Social and family contacts | B Publications Electronic information services Trade and development associations Professional and learned societies Universities and colleges Research establishments Chambers of commerce and trade Standardizing bodies Radio and TV companies Market research organizations Advertising agencies Stock Exchange Banks and insurance companies Law firms Government departments and agencies • Companies Registration Office • Business Statistics Office • Patent Office Local authorities Suppliers, customers, competitors, shareholders Public and other libraries International sources, e.g. UN, OECD, EU |
| | C Colleagues, including • Superiors • Subordinates • Staff of other departments • Board members | D Reports Memoranda Works instructions Codes and regulations Budget statements, accounts Orders and requisitions Invoices Delivery notes Analysis and test results Management information systems/decision support systems/executive information systems Expert systems Office automation systems Organizational departments and units |
| Internal | | |

Quadrant B – external/formal

It should be noted that published documentary sources are included here for the sake of completeness, but are dealt with in detail in later articles. The main purpose of this quadrant is to draw attention to the vast array of external institutional sources which are available. Many of these organizations naturally produce published documents but may often also be approached for supplementary information or advice. Take, for example, the Business Statistics Office (BSO), which collects and publishes manufacturers' sales figures and other data in the form of *Business Monitors*[1]. Frequently the published product listings are not specific enough for the enquirer, who may be looking for sales of a product which is subsumed under some more general heading. In such cases, specific data for the product sought can sometimes be supplied privately by the BSO, provided that this would not enable the enquirer to deduce the sales of any individual company. Many of these organizations have library and informa-

tion services, the staff of which can be expected to be expert in their fields and will be able to provide information directly or give advice on the use of other sources. Further information on these organizations will be found in the guides and directories listed in later articles and in textbooks such as those by Kaye[2] and Haythornthwaite[3].

Quadrant C – internal/informal

This list requires little comment, except perhaps to make the point that because these sources are the most personal of all they present special benefits and problems. On the one hand, close and perhaps long-established contact with fellow workers will tend to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility perceived by the enquirer to attach to such people. At the same time, it is undeniable that, because of organizational politics and personal rivalries, information may sometimes be withheld or misrepresented by colleagues. By contrast, the enquirer is entitled to expect objective and even-handed treatment from more formal sources such as librarians and government officials.

Quadrant D – internal/formal

Here three kinds of formal internal sources are listed: internal documentation; automated systems such as management information systems (MIS); and internal departments and units, in the context of their formal status *vis-à-vis* the enquirer, for example his/her formal relations with the accounts department or the payroll section. Computerized information systems such as MIS and decision-support systems call for special comment. These systems invariably cost a lot of money and have a high profile in the organization and consequently may raise unrealistic expectations about their value. For the most part, they deal effectively with internal quantitative data such as production and sales figures, business ratios, stock levels and the like. Sometimes they import related figures for competitor companies or industry averages, for purposes of comparison. However, they are not usually equipped to deal with softer external facts, opinions and news, which may have great impact on the organization. Qualitative information of this kind is uncomfortable and difficult to obtain and to process, and is therefore all too easily ignored. This can be a fatal error.

The future of informal communication – the Internet

In recent years telecommunications and computers, and in particular their combination into integrated (convergent) systems, have brought about great changes in the accessibility and processing of information. These systems now permit formal and informal information transfer worldwide on a massive scale, by satellite data transmission, video-conferencing, electronic mail and the like, in addition to the conventional telephone and fax systems. Managers can access remote databases on the other side of the world, select the information they require and download it into their own computer systems for further processing and analysis. In the informal sector the Internet is the latest up and coming facility.

The Internet is a collection of thousands of computer networks connecting academic, commercial and governmental organizations across the world – a network of networks. The Internet permits communication with global contacts of all kinds. They may be individuals; or special interest groups; or formal databases such as the business and management databases hosted by large information organizations. Details of some of these databases can be found below in articles by Maria Burke and Jo Drew. Managers and students of management associated with academic institutions should be able to access the Internet either through the institution's library, which will probably belong to JANET (the Joint Academic Network) or through the institution's own computer system. Many commercial and governmental organizations also provide access for their managers through commercial agencies.

The main ways of information exchange over the Internet are as follows:

- *Electronic mail* (e-mail) permits the sending and receiving of electronic messages, whether one-to-one or one-to-many. Also available are mailing lists set up by special interest groups. A member of such a mailing list will receive messages from others in the group, can send messages to the group and can conduct remote discussions with

members. Electronic documents can be exchanged and edited by e-mail without the need for repeated retyping. A manager could therefore join a special interest group to discover the latest ideas on his/her subject; or conduct electronic correspondence with specialists here and abroad.

- *Telnet* is a protocol which permits the user to log in to other computers on the Internet. This can be used for consulting remote library catalogues (OPACs – online public access catalogues) or to access bibliographic and other databases hosted remotely by organizations such as DIALOG and DATA-STAR (Knight Ridder) and PROFILE.
- *File Transfer Protocol* (ftp) allows the user to transfer files from a remote computer to the local system.

The Internet is the beginning of the promised “information superhighway” and is starting to revolutionize both formal and informal information transfer and exchange across the world. This very brief introduction gives some indication of the possibilities of the system. The best way to learn about it is, of course, to join up and try it out, but there are numerous published guides for those who wish to read more about it. Among the more useful books are *The Whole Internet User's Guide & Catalog*[4], *The Internet Guide for New Users*[5] and *The Internet Companion*[6].

References

- 1 *Business Monitors: Production Monitors* – Monthly, Quarterly and Annual Sales Series, Central Statistical Office, HMSO, London.
- 2 Kaye, D., *Information and Business: An Introduction*, Library Association, London, 1991.
- 3 Haythornthwaite, J., *The Business Information Maze: An Essential Guide*, Aslib, London, 1990.
- 4 Krol, E., *The Whole Internet: User's Guide & Catalog*, 2nd ed., O'Reilly & Associates, Sebastopol, CA, 1992.
- 5 Dern, D.P., *The Internet Guide for New Users*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY and London, 1994.
- 6 LaQuey, T.L., *The Internet Companion: A Beginner's Guide to Global Networking*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA and Wokingham, 1993.