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ABOUT FREE PINT

FreePint is an online network of information searchers. Members receive this free newsletter twice a month: it is packed with tips on finding quality and reliable business information on the Internet.

Joining is free at <http://www.freepint.com/> and provides access to a substantial archive of articles, reviews, jobs & events, with answers to research questions and networking at the FreePint Bar.

Please circulate this newsletter which is best read when printed out. To receive a fully formatted version as an attachment or a brief notification when it's online, visit <http://www.freepint.com/member>.

EDITORIAL

Why is it in this digital age we still find it so necessary to leave our desks and actually meet people? Surely with the widespread availability of real-time chatrooms, video conferencing, picture mobile phones, etc., we don't need to meet people face-to-face at all.

Of course, it is still relatively easy to travel half way around the world in the space of a day. We barely gave a second thought to our round trip of 10,000 miles in the last week visiting North and West India (photos to follow soon). Of course, there was the minor inconvenience of a few injections, some obnoxious tablets and the fun of getting a business visa in time. They're all tiny considerations when you weigh up the enormous benefits gained from the contacts we made at conference sessions and relationships formed in meetings.

There are many proponents of a digital world who say that everything should be online. Hard-copy publications should be PDFs, meetings should be virtual ones. However, I'm starting to realise that there are many advantages to not following the crowd. I liken the 'online vs. offline' debate to that of investing money -- in the UK at the moment everyone is focussing on investing in property because stocks are doing so badly. A few years ago everyone invested in stocks (before the 'dotcom correction'). If you had invested in property at that time you'd be laughing now; likewise I'd be willing to bet that if you invested in stocks now then you'll benefit greatly when house prices level out (as they're beginning to do) and the focus shifts again to the money people are making on stocks and shares. You can hold me to that in a few years' time.

The message in our feature article today is that it's all about balance. Take advantage of the timeliness of teleconferencing but remember that there's nothing quite like shaking hands with someone, especially at the beginning of a relationship. If everyone else is sending out emails then something through the post will get you much more attention. If a remote supplier of yours communicates with all its clients virtually, then think of the advantages you'll gain by jumping on a plane and going to see them.

Our recent travels confirmed how important this balance is. Ours may be a 'virtual' business in many ways, but it doesn't have a future if we forget about the importance and value of 'real' meetings.

Anyway, thank you for all your nominations for the 'Online Information/FreePint Innovative Customer Service Award'. Voting closes very soon so do get your skates on if you want your vote to be recorded <http://www.freepint.com/events/online-info-2003/>. Report sales are still strong, so if you have a topic you'd like us to cover in the future then let us know <http://www.freepint.com/shop/report/>.

All the best
William

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This week's selected listings are below. All new jobs are posted to the Bar and Bar Digest (circulation 12,000+) and matched against the 1000+ live job seeker profiles. This week's Bar 'new jobs' listing is at <http://www.freepint.com/go/b26091>.

Here are some of the latest featured jobs:

Internet Research Analyst
<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2720>
Determine information sources for markets, produce demonstrations, monitoring companies, product development.
Recruiter: Magus Research Ltd

Senior Researcher
<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2727>
Strategic Senior Researcher to deal with overseas and U.K. research initiatives in the financial services sector. High salary and bonus.
Recruiter: Glen Recruitment

Website Content Co-ordinator
<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2730>
Put your web skills to use near Leicester; develop content, influence design, liaise with content providers; min 1yr exp.
Recruiter: Sue Hill Recruitment

Senior Lecturer in Information and Knowledge Management
<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2744>
Full-time academic to make a key contribution to the delivery and future development of our post-graduate provision.
Recruiter: London Metropolitan University

Assistant Information Officer
<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2746>
Working in our busy Information and Resources Centre, this varied role involves maintaining a range of systems.
Recruiter: Evangelical Alliance

New White Paper from Factiva

Do you need to manage and organise large volumes of data? Are users within your organization finding precisely the information they need? Factiva's Taxonomy White Paper examines the value brought to our news and business information service, to clients who license the taxonomy as a fundamental component of their own Enterprise Information Architecture. Download the White Paper at <http://www.factiva.com/redirects/whitepaper/register/freepint>

Award for innovative customer service - nominations please

Voting closes soon for this information industry-wide award. Cast your vote and reward innovative customer service:

<http://www.freepint.com/go/b25898>

FreePint Members - Interested in pharmaceutical business information

Urch Publishing is a leading provider of business reports and information about the global pharmaceuticals industry. Our reports are designed for information and research professionals and are packed with useful information. Recent report topics include parallel trade, manufacturing and drug delivery. Instant e-delivery is available for most products. Why not tour the site and register for updates, go to: <http://www.urchpublishing.com>

Practical Guide to Negotiating Licenses for Electronic Products
ISBN 1904769012

If you negotiate licenses for electronic products then don't miss this valuable report from FreePint. Tips on contract clauses, model license agreements and more.

"Very useful document - informative, comprehensive and commonsensical. I regard it as good value for money since part of my job is to negotiate software licences."

<http://www.freepint.com/shop/report/>

MY FAVOURITE TIPPLES
by Natalie Pollecutt

The week before last week was the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union, and this year is also 75 years since women got the vote on equal terms with men in Britain. Therefore, here is a set of topical Tipples.

Natalie Pollecutt is a librarian at The Women's Library, where she also helps maintain the Genesis website for women's history resources in the British Isles.

Tell us about your favourite Web sites. Check out the guidelines at <http://www.freepint.com/author.htm>, then email <penny@freepint.com>.

- <http://learningcurve.pro.gov.uk/britain1906-18/> - Investigate women, society and the vote using primary material from the National Archives in the form of digitised documents, to ask who was for and against women's suffrage, and why.

- <http://www.mepl.co.uk/java/jsp/ml_28.htm> - An article about the visual imagery used by suffrage campaigners from the Mary Evans Picture Library, which also supplies images of many campaigners and events of the time.

- <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/women.htm> - Good overviews of the individuals and organisations of the campaign, along with essays on the place of women in society, strategy and tactics used by campaigners, and parliamentary reform acts.

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/society_culture/women/> - This site has essays on the ideals of Victorian womanhood, women in the 20th century and the suffrage campaign, and includes a useful historic figures section.

- <http://www.iisg.nl/~womhist/vlwhtop.html#rights> - General information on women's rights and suffrage from around the world, from the excellent women's history virtual library of the International Institute of Women's History in Amsterdam.

EVENTS

United Kingdom

- "European Supply Chain & Logistics summit" - discuss your business requirements with leading solution providers. 28th - 29th October <http://www.freepint.com/go/e205>.
- "Joint RSC CIG/CSA Trust Chemical Information Training Day" - "structure searching in relation to chemical reactions, chemical properties and chemicals reported in patents". 30th October <http://www.freepint.com/go/e250> London.
- "STN Engineering Forum" - find out more about STN search tools. 30th October <http://www.freepint.com/go/e252>.
- "VolInfo: Voluntary Sector Information Workers Network Launch Event" 7th November organised by CILIP <http://www.freepint.com/go/e253>.
- "Association of UK Media Librarians Annual Conference", 14th - 16th November 2003 <http://www.freepint.com/go/e219>.

France

- "Competia/Media Institute European Symposium 2003" - forum for Competitive Intelligence, Marketing, Communication and Strategic Planning professionals to meet" 5th - 7th November <http://www.freepint.com/go/e230>.

Australia and Territories

- "Building an effective strategy for Email Management" with case studies and presentations in Sydney on 29th - 30th October <http://www.freepint.com/go/e247>.
- "Information Architectures and Taxonomies" - "Making your web site or intranet easily navigable, searchable, and browsable", 5th - 7th November <http://www.freepint.com/go/e246>.

United States

- "Supply Chain & Logistics summit" organised by the World Trade Group 18th - 20th November 2003 <http://www.freepint.com/go/e204>.

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FREE PINT BAR
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It's fascinating reading some of the questions, answers and debates at the Bar. It's not only the variety either, but the staggering generosity and knowledge of FreePinters.

There aren't many (any?) questions which go unanswered and you can always pick up good advice. Such as that given recently, along with some warnings, on where to host Web sites and who to use when registering/renewing domain names <http://www.freepint.com/go/b26020>.

We think WiFi is great as we're just starting to use it at FreePint. It's not easy to specify a WiFi installation solution though so if you're looking into it then read some of the advice given in this thread <http://www.freepint.com/go/b25983>.

There are plenty of market research requests like one looking for the market capitalisation of European stock indices such as FTSE, DAX, CAC, IBEX <http://www.freepint.com/go/b25970>. Do you know where to find the top five alarm companies in France, Germany, Italy and Spain <http://www.freepint.com/go/b25958>?

How can one FreePinter identify the largest UK central government agencies by employee size and IT budget <http://www.freepint.com/go/b26118>? Is there a directory of directories <http://www.freepint.com/go/b26120>? Is there an authoritative work on empowerment and its effect on business <http://www.freepint.com/go/b25960>? Or software that can data-match between two large lists of companies <http://www.freepint.com/go/b25913>?

Any and all help greatly appreciated.

The FreePint Bar is where you can get help with your tricky research questions, for free! <www.freepint.com/bar>

Help with study for information-related courses is available at the FreePint Student Bar <www.freepint.com/student>.

Twice-weekly email digests of the latest postings can be requested at <www.freepint.com/member>.

TIPS ARTICLE

"Insurance: a review of websites"
By Trevor Harvey

Insurance is central to most peoples' lives, whether it be insuring a car, or the contents of a house, or providing a pension for retirement. The UK insurance industry is the third largest in the world employing 360,000 people. There are a huge number of websites devoted to insurance - the Chartered Insurance Institute (CII) say there are over a thousand.

This review is split into two sections, concentrating on those sites specifically aimed at the consumer and those which will be of more interest to the information professional undertaking insurance research, though the two categories are not, of course, mutually exclusive. The review concentrates mostly on UK sites, though some with a more international scope are also examined. Unfortunately, some excellent sites were rejected for inclusion as they contained many dead links or were not regularly updated.

For the consumer

The UK insurance web guide <http://www.uk-insurance-web.co.uk/> explains the different kinds of insurance available and the points to consider when choosing an insurance policy. A directory of policy providers is categorised by different types of insurance, e.g. car, home, boat, life, travel and health. Another site which provides links to various insurance companies with details of the policies they offer is the UK Insurance Company Directory <http://www.uk-insurance-pages.co.uk/>.

An insurance broker is someone who advises consumers on their insurance needs and negotiates on their behalf with insurers. On their website, the British Insurance Brokers Association (BIBA) <http://www.biba.org.uk/> proclaim that they are "the UK's leading independent insurance body, representing both the insurance broker and the consumer". The site provides advice on choosing a policy and the role of an insurance broker. There is also a useful 'jargon buster' or glossary.

Another organisation which emphasises the interests of consumers is the General Insurance Standards Council <http://www.gisc.co.uk/Home/default.asp> the UK watchdog established "to set, monitor and enforce standards in all areas of general insurance, including the fair treatment of customers". Their Private Customer Code provides the consumer with important protection and supplies guidance on taking out insurance as well as the procedures for making claims and complaints.

The Financial Ombudsman Service <http://www.financial-ombudsman.org.uk/> was set up to provide consumers with a free, independent service for resolving disputes with financial firms, including complaints about insurance policies and personal pension plans.

For the researcher

A good place to start for someone new to insurance research is to check out the Association of British Insurers (ABI) website

<http://www.abi.org.uk/>. The ABI represents around 400 companies, transacting 95% of the business of UK insurance companies. The site has a directory of UK insurance companies <http://www.abi.org.uk/CompanyList/> with address and telephone details and links to individual company websites. The 'key facts' section provides a useful overview of the insurance industry in the UK. There is also a statistics section, most of it on free access, but some of the data is only available by purchasing it. The 'Insurance Zone' contains information on specific insurance products (e.g. motor, travel, illness). There is also the usual range of publications you get with any major trade association website including responses to consultation documents on proposals affecting the insurance market.

The insurance researcher would also be well advised to check out the Chartered Insurance Institute (CII) website <http://www.cii.co.uk/thecii/index.html>. The CII is "the largest and most influential professional and educational organisation in the global insurance and financial services industries today". The most useful part of the CII website is the Information Services section which is only available on subscription.

If you are looking for a good insurance current awareness service, you could do worse than use the one provided by Insurance Times <http://www.insurancetimes.co.uk/>. The site also has a glossary of terms.

A good portal is the Insurance Industry Internet Network <http://www.iiin.com> which claims to connect to "thousands of insurance related sites". There is a directory of insurance companies on the internet <http://www.iiin.com/iiincompanies.html> and a similar list of insurance law firms <http://www.insurancelawlist.com> and insurance agents and brokers <http://www.iiin.com/iiinagents.html>. There are also links to a wide variety of insurance related resources on the web with a distinct North American bias, though there were an unacceptably high number of dead links when I checked the site in mid-September 2003.

I would not normally recommend one individual insurance company's website over another, but an exception has to be made in the case of Swiss Re <http://www.swissre.com/> who produce the highly regarded 'Sigma Insurance Research' reports. The website blurb informs us that "the Sigma publication series provides comprehensive information on the international insurance markets and in-depth analyses of economic trends and strategic issues in insurance, reinsurance and financial services, covering life and non-life business". There is also a useful facts and figures section, covering, for example, the twelve biggest insurance markets as a percentage of the global market.

London

The London Insurance Market is a distinct, separate part of the UK insurance and reinsurance industry centred on the City of London. The International Underwriting Association of London (IUA) <http://www.iua.co.uk> is both a trade association, representing its members' interests internationally, and a market association

Trevor Harvey has worked in the information profession for over 20 years and is currently Information Officer for the Financial Institutions Group at global law firm Clifford Chance in London, which has just become the first City law firm to relocate to Canary Wharf. This is his fourth article for FreePint. His book 'The role of the legal information officer' has recently been published by Chandos Publishing and is available from Extenza-Turpin, Blackhorse Road, Letchworth, Herts SG6 1HN, UK. Tel: +44 (0) 1462 672 555, email: <books@extenza-turpin.com>.

supporting the business environment in London. The IUA site contains useful marine and underwriting statistics going back to 1993.

Lloyd's

According to their website <http://www.lloyds.com/index.asp> Lloyd's of London is the world's leading insurance market providing specialist insurance services to businesses in over 120 countries. It is the world's second largest commercial insurer and sixth largest reinsurance group. A proper evaluation of the Lloyd's website would warrant a FreePint article all to itself, but among its many pages are the 'Presentation toolkit' which provides up-to-date information on the Lloyd's of London market, a 'Codes Handbook', market results, capacity, market directories, a list of accredited Lloyd's brokers as well as the usual news and publications sections. An important part of the site is the 'Market and Regulatory Bulletins': market bulletins are the formal means of advising the Lloyd's market of business critical issues; notification of regulatory changes are made by means of a regulatory bulletin. Like all websites that carry a lot of information, the Lloyd's website is not that easy to find your way around, but the information it contains is top quality stuff.

Cross-border

Nearly a quarter of UK insurance companies' net premiums is derived from overseas business [ABI website: <http://www.abi.org.uk>] so it is important to consider the international aspects of insurance business. At a European level, the Comite Europeen des Assurances (CEA - the European Federation of National Insurance Associations) <http://www.cea.assur.org/> is an important organisation charged with representing the common interests of European insurers by "promoting, defending and illustrating their views in international bodies". The website has statistics, newsletters and 'position papers' which are commentary on insurance issues being discussed at an EU level. There is a useful link to all the various European insurance associations.

Established in 1994, the International Association of Insurance Supervisors (IAIS) <http://www.iaisweb.org/> represents insurance supervisory authorities in some 100 jurisdictions. One of its remits is to set international standards for insurance supervision and the website has issue papers, guidance and other publications including a glossary of terms.

Legal and regulatory

Finally, anyone undertaking research into the insurance industry and markets needs to be aware of current legal and regulatory developments. In the UK, the Financial Services Authority (FSA) <http://www.fsa.gov.uk> regulates over 800 authorised insurance companies. EU developments are covered by the European Commission's Directorate General (DG) for the Internal Market Financial Services and their website <http://europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/insurance/index_en.htm> has a page devoted to insurance covering legislation both in force and in preparation plus overviews of topics such as life assurance, insurance mediation and reinsurance.

GOLD

Last year, John Lewell's tips article looked at site performance and Penny Leidtke gave "a broad overview of the factors considered, steps taken, and resources used to setup and run On-Target Information Services."

- FreePint No.123 17th October 2002. "Is your site slow, medium or fast, and does it really matter? Essential Sources for Web Performance Analysis and Improvement" and "Taking the Plunge into the Entrepreneurial World of the Independent Information Professional" http://www.freepint.com/issues/171002.htm

In 2001 our tips article listed some useful WAP sites and Helen Bilton shared some sources of vacancies and advice in the voluntary sector.

- FreePint No.98, 19th October 2001. "WAP Sites and the Mobile Internet" and "Working in Information in the UK Voluntary Sector" http://www.freepint.com/issues/191001.htm

Three years ago John Elliot focussed on mineral exploration in his article on Geology. Anke Baumgartner looked at key providers that are currently utilised by her broker service.

- FreePint No.73, 19th October 2000. "Geology On The Web" and "European Document Delivery Suppliers and Resources On The World Wide Web" http://www.freepint.com/issues/191000.htm

In 1999 Carey McIlvenny picked out some of her favourite music sites. Richard Wilson talked us through Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL).

- FreePint No.48, 21st October 1999. "Notes on the Net: A trawl around the Music Sites" and "Unblocking the Web: digital technology and the telephone line" http://www.freepint.com/issues/071099.htm

In 1998 John Garside guided us on what to consider when purchasing a modem. Sue Welsh looked at consumer health information.

- FreePint No.24, 15th October 1998. "How to select and optimise your PC Internet modem" and "A guide to Consumer Health Information on the 'Net" http://www.freepint.com/issues/011098.htm

Penny <penny@freepint.com>

Free Pint Forthcoming Articles

* HR Personnel Information*
* Rankings * Records Management *
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If you have a suggestion for an article topic or would like to write for Free Pint then please contact <penny@freepint.com> or sign up for the Author Update at <http://www.freepint.com/author.htm>.

Veronica Bezear is an Information Officer working for Surrey County Council's Adults and Community Care service. She writes here in a personal capacity.

Related links:

- Find out more about this book online at the FreePint Bookshelf <http://www.freepint.com/bookshelf/face.htm>

- Read customer comments and buy this book at Amazon.co.uk <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0764526413/freepint0c> or Amazon.com <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0764526413/freepint00>

- "About Face 2.0: The Essentials of Interaction Design" ISBN 0764526413, published by John Wiley & Sons, written by Alan Cooper, Robert M. Reimann.

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"About Face 2.0: The Essentials of Interaction Design"
Reviewed by Veronica Bezear

At 506 pages of main text, this book is probably a little long for end users to read simply for interest. As an information worker involved in websites, evaluating or training on software, it is a useful if lengthy 'should-read'. For those considering a career in usability or interaction design this is, fairly obviously, a must-read.

As a user/information worker my first verdict was "I wish half the programmers who designed the software I use had had to read this". Cooper has a lively turn of phrase - "lipstick on the pig" for badly designed software with a prettied-up user interface, "fascist-ware" for programs which will only accept your input on their terms and, expressing our typical frustration with programs which are not helping us: "if a 10 year old child behaved like some software programs, he'd be sent to his bed without any supper".

As well as the almost evangelical tone - taking up the cause of users - there is an impressive amount of technical but mostly jargon-free detail on building robust user-focussed interfaces. The book starts from a description of the goal-directed design process (modelling users and their goals, building scenarios) moves to general usability issues (eliminating excise, making software considerate) to visual design issues (designing look and feel) to detailed discussion of interaction fundamentals (mice, controls, dialogs,) but surprisingly does not question keyboards. He finishes with, for me, the most thought-provoking sections on communicating with users (errors, confirmations etc.) and current issues: designing for the web and for embedded systems (mobiles kiosks etc). One-line "axioms" & "design tips" flag up the issues which the authors see as most important throughout the book, and are collated in appendices.

Programmers should probably read this but may well feel that as a breed they have been

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unfairly treated with the message that they cannot represent the interests of users on a design team as their interests and motivations are focussed elsewhere. Online reactions I read elsewhere varied from someone who wasn't sure about the author's attitude to programmers, to an enthusiast who claimed to have read it in a weekend (what, all of it?). Some in the industry may still find the focus of this book too Microsoft or Windows focussed.

Between About Face and About Face 2.0 there has been a gap of eight years, several lifetimes in software terms. It will be interesting to see, by the time About Face 3.0 comes out, how many of his recommendations have been taken up by the major vendors as common practice and how many remain on the campaigning list. I look forward to reading the next version, whenever it appears. I wouldn't imagine we will have to wait eight years for it.

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FREE PINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE
"Out of sight but not out of mind: virtual meetings"
By Alison Turner

Alison Turner works as the Library Partnership Co-ordinator with the National electronic Library for Health <http://www.nelh.nhs.uk>, which sits within the National Health Service in England. Alison has worked in health libraries for around 9 years, having previously worked in hospital, research and academic settings.

If I was to ask any of my colleagues in the health library community whether they felt they had sufficient time to keep up to date, chances are most would come back with an emphatic no! You're probably thinking the same, as you snatch a few minutes from your busy schedule to read FreePint. Our working days are a crammed schedule of meetings, appointments, phone calls, enquiries and oh yes, professional development activities. Finding a few minutes here and there to catch up with colleagues, or with the latest news and developments, can be difficult. Add to that the current joys and costs of travel, and getting out to a meeting or training event can present some interesting hurdles.

But, all is not lost, as there are now many ways to keep up to date with colleagues without leaving your desk. Whilst there's no replacement for face-to-face, there are some alternatives which can help. This isn't a round-up of new technologies. It's more a picture of how things look in the health library community right now. Some of these tools have been around a while, some are new on the scene but it's interesting to take a step back and look at how professional communication has changed in the last few years.

Email lists, or discussion lists, have been around a while. I remember using them as a student and that's going back some time now! Within the health library community, the JISCmail service <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk> is heavily used, with the lis-medical list generating over 150 messages a month. Whilst much of the communication via mail lists is routine (e.g: help with interlibrary loans; help with difficult searches), there are the occasional gems where subscribers share their know-how and experience. A recent example: a librarian was looking for new ideas to improve her information skills training programme; following a request on a mail list, she was able to gather the ideas and suggestions of a number of colleagues, share with others online and adapt the suggestions to suit her local circumstances. This kind of communication is great when it works - you can ask a large body of people for thoughts, you may never have met them or talked to them, and from that group you can generate ideas you wouldn't have thought of on your own.

Teleconferencing and videoconferencing are also nothing new but are being used in innovative ways, such as delivering search skills training to remote users. Teleconferencing is great for brainstorming; I was recently involved in a brainstorming call and it worked exceptionally well. Within the NHS in England, teleconferencing has recently been used as a training medium to accompany the national rollout of electronic resources. The key benefit of teleconferenced training is saved time: an hour of training takes an hour and there's no travel to factor in. We're planning to use it to train health professionals during an awareness campaign later in the year. It will have the attraction of being short (10 minutes), available (day and night thanks to recordings) and confidential (for those who are embarrassed about not knowing search skills!).

Taking this a step further, professional associations, such as the Special Libraries Association and the Medical Library Association, are offering a range of virtual seminars. Both are US-based organisations, but the virtual seminars they host are available to librarians around the world. An opportunity to learn with international colleagues without having to pay expensive air fares! Typically these take the form of a teleconference linked to a simultaneous webcast. There are opportunities to ask questions so, in essence, it's just like a seminar. It's just on a bigger scale (geographically and in terms of numbers) and you can't see the other participants.

Professional associations are developing extensive online resources to support members, recognising that many find it difficult to attend the annual conference and intermittent study days. Access to resources online helps to avoid the sense of professional isolation and to encourage professional development.

There are other smaller support networks operating virtually. At the National electronic Library for Health (NeLH), we have recently led the development of a Digital Libraries Network, bringing together librarians and trainers interested in training and promotion. The idea behind the network is to get people sharing ideas, experience and best practice via a virtual community. We created an online resource <http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/dlnet> to support the network which features case studies, materials, know-how and tools. A key element of the virtual community is a weblog <http://dlnet.blogspot.com>. Created in June, the weblog was designed to encourage the network to share their thoughts. We deliberately chose a weblog over a mail list as we felt it to be less intrusive - with a mail list the messages come into your inbox, relevant or not. With a weblog you just have to remember to check it regularly and post something when you can. The weblog has proved to be a very rich source of ideas. The best tips feed into our Tip of the Week and other useful comments will be synthesised for our Know How resource.

Blogging in libraries is nothing new and we had many excellent examples to follow. At the time of writing, the directory of library blogs at <http://www.libdex.com/weblogs.html> lists over 100 blogs and there are a few I know of that aren't on there. Another favourite listing is <http://www.hi.is/~anne/weblogs.html>. Blogging is an interesting trend to watch but even more interesting to take part in. I regularly visit a handful of blogs as they are a fantastic

way of keeping up to date with the latest news and developments - it's like being spoon-fed information.

As well as keeping in touch with colleagues to share information and ideas, librarians are making use of virtual communities to learn. Universities have long provided distance learning and supporting online resources. Email conferencing can be a great way to discuss course themes and topics when students are remotely based. However, such methods are being introduced into less formal learning situations. Earlier this year, we ran a short pilot programme of training for health librarians in the UK. The pilot consisted of three modules, on project management, service evaluation and evidence- based librarianship. Modules were delivered via email and the web only; there were no printed materials and no events. Students were allocated buddies to work through the course materials; some tasks were oriented to individual working and some to buddy working. The pilot proved successful and the evaluation suggested a number of ways of improving the experience for students.

However, many would argue there is no substitute for face-to-face contact. For example, there is a big debate about the value of e-learning against traditional face-to-face. So what does face-to-face really offer?

Not so long ago, I heard a speaker say (at a training event on virtual working) that the half life of trust is three months. This has been attributed to Jeremy Scanlan, former manager at Digital Equipment Corporation; he was talking about why distributed teams need to meet face-to-face occasionally. What this means is that to build relationships we need to see people, meet them face-to-face, every six months or so. To build and maintain relationships with key colleagues, there has to be some face-to-face connection.

The pros and cons of virtual versus face-to-face came out strongly in the evaluation of our pilot online training programme. Positive comments included:

- "[...] overcomes problems of distance to venue, time out (although strict time management required!) and relevancy ... all the topics are extremely pertinent"

- "[the best thing about the course was] being able to experiment with virtual 'group work' with my buddy"

- "[the best thing about the course was] not having travel and find parking spaces"

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- "[the worst thing about the course was] not having the interaction you get on a face-to-face course. Having a Buddy is fine, and it was the two Buddy exercises were really useful, but on a day course it's the chat over coffee and lunch as much as the formal sessions which add to the overall learning experience."

- "[the worst thing about the course was] lack of face-to-face with the facilitator e.g. questions at end of talks"

So it would seem that face-to-face contact remains an important part of librarians' professional networking. Although we now have many different ways of communicating with our colleagues, we still crave that social contact. So the study day is not at risk but perhaps better reserved for those occasions which benefit most from the face-to-face contact. The virtual world connects us to our colleagues and is a great way to keep up to date and share ideas. If we were to look back a few years, professional communication was very different. Whilst the technologies themselves may not be new, ability to access these different media is perhaps new. For example, I now schedule teleconferencing, blogging and other such activities alongside face-to-face meetings and training events. Faced with such drivers as the growing popularity of weblogs, the rollout of broadband and the falling costs of conferencing, the virtual meeting place may very soon become a common feature of a health librarian's day.

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