CONTENTS

HTML Version
    <http://www.freepint.com/issues/170403.htm>

Fully Formatted Acrobat Version
    <http://www.freepint.com/issues/170403.pdf>

ABOUT FREE PINT

   FreePint is an online community of information researchers. 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

   OK, so maybe I've been getting it all wrong in my last few Editorials. There I was, thinking that we should be inspiring people to become fully-fledged information professionals. However, colleagues of mine in the profession have voiced concerns that this may actually diminish the professional status of people who really are expert information researchers.

   So, what's the balance? One key message that we can convey, and it's one I've heard many times lately, is that there's more to Internet searching than just Google. Not only that it is dangerous to limit research to one set of data, but more importantly, Google doesn't assess the reliability of the information to which it is linking; Google only knows about the popularity of a Web site. Another common misconception is that Google provides answers. It doesn't. It just links to pages that may contain an answer.

   Gary Price, Editor of ResourceShelf, is a real evangelist when it comes to these issues. He regularly sums things up in compact sound bites, for example:

   "The challenge, especially for information professionals, is to be aware of and make use of other resources, both general web engines as well as specialized web resources. It's also essential that we illustrate to patrons, teachers, and anyone who will listen that traditional library resources (and our skills) are still vital."
   ResourceShelf.com, 13th April 2003

   If you're interested in these issues then keep half an eye on the FreePint Bar <http://www.freepint.com/bar> and of course the ResourceShelf <http://www.ResourceShelf.com>.

   Alongside today's newsletter, we're sending you a separate note about the "CILIP/FreePint Online Community Award". Make sure you nominate any online community project which you think has been particularly successful <http://www.freepint.com/events/cilip-2003/>. There's also news of the 'FreePint Freedom of Information Exchange', taking place in London this July <http://www.freepint.com/exchange/>.

   We had a very informative and productive time at FAB'03 last week, the annual Factiva Advisory Board in Princeton, New Jersey. This was our third year and Factiva are always excellent hosts. A selection of photos are online <http://www.freepint.com/go/b23373>.

   We're sure you'll get a lot out of today's FreePint, and please keep spreading the word.

Cheers
William

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FREE PINT JOBS
<http://www.freepint.com/jobs>

This week's selected listings are below. All new jobs are posted to the Bar and Bar Digest (circulation 10,000+). This week's is at <http://www.freepint.com/go/b23366> and last week's at <http://www.freepint.com/go/b23264>.

Here are some of the latest featured jobs:

Academic Leader in Information Management
<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2410>
Provide academic and managerial leadership for the team, develop its portfolio of postgraduate programmes and enhance its research profile.
Recruiter: London Metropolitan University

Senior Researcher/Analyst
<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2413>
Senior Strategic Research Analyst with strong market sizing and financial analysis skills. Recruiter: Glen Recruitment

Database Marketing Manager
<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2414>
Experienced marketing professional with flair for copy writing and compiling databases required for charity think tank.
Recruiter: Recruit Media

Regional Sales Manager
<http://www.freepint.com/go/j2417>
Regional Sales Manager role for someone to sell web-based dbase solutions across the South of England - basic + uncapped OTE & car. Recruiter: Sue Hill Recruitment

[The above jobs are paid listings]

Find out more today at <http://www.freepint.com/jobs>

Trade Partners UK Information Centre Trade Statistics Workshops

Come along to this FREE seminar and increase your knowledge of export statistics, a valuable resource for exporters and researchers. There will also be a demonstration of statistics databases, covering over 100 countries, which can be used at the Centre. Workshops are on 20 May at Trade Partners UK Information Centre, 66 - 74, Victoria St., London, SW1. For more information, call 020 7215 5444/5445 or visit www.tradepartners.gov.uk/information_centre to apply online.

FreePint Freedom of Information Exchange

22nd July 2003, London, UK

This seminar will provide an overview of the Freedom of Information Act. The session will cover: practical issues to consider when implementing FOI; discrepancies between the Data Protection and Freedom of Information regimes; the role of the publication scheme; records management issues; handling FOI requests; right of appeal, complaints procedures & compliance matters; copyright issues.

http://www.freepint.com/exchange/fi220703.htm

Library + Information Show - 30th April + 1st May 2003

With over 120 exhibitors and a comprehensive, free seminar programme spending a day at LiS will prove to be invaluable. Many exhibitors have chosen LiS to showcase new products & services. You will also have the opportunity to listen to meet Roger McGough and Joanne Harris, author of Chocolat et al. For a full list of exhibitors and seminars please visit our web site.
<http://www.lishow.co.uk/pint>

LiS 30th April +1st May 2003, ExCeL, London

The CILIP/FreePint Online Community Award

Since group communication and support online have become so important, the Online Community Award is your chance to nominate any online community project from any sector that has brought people with common interests together in a virtual environment:

<http://www.freepint.com/events/cilip-2003/>

FreePint Financials -- All UK Companies and Directors

Free to search. Pay-as-you-go detailed reports. Comprehensive. Why not give it a go?
<http://www.freepint.com/icc>

MY FAVOURITE TIPPLES
from Gary Price

Gary Price is Editor of ResourceShelf <http://www.resourceshelf.com>, where he attempts to keep himself and several thousand others current with new resources, updated sites, useful tools, etc.

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

- **NewsNow** <http://www.newsnow.co.uk> - The amount of resources keeps growing. An essential news tool! NewsNow's "Live Feed" <http://www.newsnow.co.uk/livefeed/> turns your computer into a virtual news ticker.

- **AltaVista News Search** <http://news.altavista.com> - Greatly improved. Useful limiting options. A German language version (with German language content) is now available too. <http://de.altavista.com/news/default>.

- **WebSite-Watcher** <http://www.aignes.net> - If you want to monitor changes on web pages, this is a must-have! It's more than worth the price. Nevertheless, don't want to spend any money or don't want to use shareware? Try WatchThatPage.Com <http://www.watchthatpage.com>, almost as good. The price is right: free!

- **GlobalEdge** <http://globaledge.msu.edu/> - A large and fact-filled directory of international business materials from the library at Michigan St. University.

- **Reverse Linking with AllTheWeb** <http://www.alltheweb.com> - Most of you know that with most web engines you can find out who is linking to a specific web page. For example, with Google you would enter "link:www.freepint.co.uk" (without the quotes) to find all of the other pages that link to FreePint's home page. The problem is that with Google this is as far as you can take it.

  For example, you can't ask Google to show you only .edu sites linking to FreePint. However, with AllTheWeb you can. Simply type "link:www.freepint.co.uk site:edu". Want to see just pages that link to the UK Parliament's site on servers in Canada with the word library in the title? It's easy. Enter, "link:parliament.uk site:ca title:library". You get the idea!

Subscribe to Factiva's InfoPro Alliance Newsletter

As a member of the InfoPro Alliance, you will receive our monthly e-mail newsletter telling you about the latest enhancements to Factiva.com, product tips, TechTalk and links to our new online sessions for advanced searchers

<http://www.factiva.com/infopro>

Contact the largest community of information users anywhere

Quick, simple and cost-effective: <http://www.freepint.com/advert.htm>

FREE PINT BAR
In Association with Factiva
a Dow Jones & Reuters Company

You've heard us talk about being information professionals and information scientists, but what's really involved? Do you really need to have a degree? Can the job be done solely over the Internet, without having to physically be in a library?

These are all questions which have arisen and been answered at the FreePint Bar over the last few days. There's a lengthy and extremely informative thread about the "Work environment of Information Science/Management" <http://www.freepint.com/go/b22337>. A FreePinter doing a Masters in Information Management asks some direct answers and gets direct responses <http://www.freepint.com/go/b23362>.

Finally, CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) get a lengthy and thorough roasting in response to the posting at <http://www.freepint.com/go/b23047>. It has to be said they do a thoroughly good job of responding too. Bravo.

EVENTS
<http://www.freepint.com/events>

Spring must be the season of Events, as I have five to tell you about in this issue.

"For professionals in all sectors of learning, development, education and training", The BAOL Conference 2003 is on 29th-30th April in Warwick, UK <http://www.freepint.com/go/e188>.

City Information Group have organised a seminar on data protection which will be happening on the 29th April in London <http://www.freepint.com/go/e193>. Speakers include Axel Tandberg, FEDMA and Glyn Morgan, Taylor Wessing.

The Library + Information Show is for anyone in the library and information profession. It is taking place in London on 30th April-1st May <http://www.freepint.com/go/e162>.

The Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP) are holding their annual conference at the beginning of May in Providence RI, United States on 1st-4th May 2003 <http://www.freepint.com/go/e169>.

Also at the beginning of May is the Mobilising Knowledge 2003 conference. Organised by Aslib/IMI who declare "this is the only KM Conference you need to attend this year!" <http://www.freepint.com/go/e185>.

Last but by no means least, FreePint are running another topical Exchange on the Freedom of Information Act in July. Book early to ensure a place <http://www.freepint.com/go/e189>.
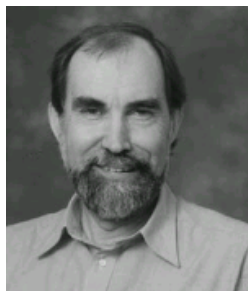
Submit details of your event today for free promotion. Simply complete the form at <http://www.freepint.com/events>.

TIPS ARTICLE

<http://www.freepint.com/issues/170403.htm#tips>

"Radio on the Internet"
By Ian Winship

Ian Winship works in the Learning Resources Department at Northumbria University and is responsible for managing and facilitating access to electronic resources and developing new services, though Internet radio is not yet one of them! Joint author of the Student's guide to the Internet, which reached three editions, he is a long-time user of the Internet from the days when the Web was text-only and hyperlinks were numbers you keyed.

Do you want news from Australia, business or current affairs information from Hong Kong or just some background music while you work? Well, Internet radio could be the answer.

What is it? Well it's sound programmes transmitted as streaming audio files that can be received fairly reliably, even with a low-bandwidth connection to the Net. You can listen live, to programmes from a normal radio station that broadcasts in the usual way too; or to one that transmits only on the Internet. Or you can call up the archives of many programmes.

It's not clear how many Internet radio stations there are, but claims in some of the directories below would suggest well over 3,000. Stations may be general in content - with a variety of programming like some of the BBC stations - or specialist, concentrating on, say, news or a particular type of music. Directories tend to group stations into topic areas or genres, with the large majority for music. The non-music ones are typically News/current affairs, Talk, Spoken Word, Government, Religious, Business and so on. The range is wide, as these very selective random examples show:

- Austrian parliament <http://www.parlament.gv.at/>

- Bloomberg radio <http://www.bloomberg.com/radio/> for business news

- California Waste Management Board <http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/Broadcast/>

- China Radio International <http://www.cri.com.cn/>

- CSPAN <http://www.c-span.org/watch/cspanradio.asp?Cat=TV&Code=CSR> - US government activity

- iOGR: Oil and Gas Radio <http://www.oilandgasradio.com/> - news, markets, employment

- Magyar Katolikus Radio (Hungary) <http://www.mkr.hu/>

- National Public Radio(US) <http://www.npr.org/>

- Personal Success Radio <http://www.personalsuccessradio.com/>

- Radio Australia news <http://www.abc.net.au/ra/default.htm>

- Radio Maria Columbia <http://www.radiomariacol.org/> - religious

- Radio Rwanda <http://www.orinfor.gov.rw/radiorwanda.htm>

- Vatican radio <http://www.vaticanradio.org/>

- Voice of the Mediterranean <http://www.vomradio.com/>

- ZIZ Broadcasting Corporation (Saint Kitts Nevis) <http://www.zizonline.com/>

There are also lots of stations from universities, US police forces, US state senates, those that scan US fire department radio, retro radio with programmes from the 50s, local stations, etc.

Many stations like the BBC and NPR will have discussion, documentaries, drama, poetry and so on.

If you just want news, for example, then tuning to a station at any time will usually suffice - finding a particular play or discussion programme is more difficult, as is noted below.

Not all stations broadcast all day, so remember time differences if you are looking for overseas stations. The one you want may not be live at the time you try -- or if you wonder why the music is a bit relaxed, it's probably because it's 3.00am in California!

Audio software

To listen, you need a computer with a sound card, speakers and/or headphones. For speech-based programmes a basic system is fine. For hi-fi listening then sound card and speaker upgrades will be necessary.

To deal with the variety of streaming audio software used by stations you will need RealOne Player <http://uk.real.com/> and Windows Media Player <http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/> with probably winamp <http://www.winamp.com/> too for MP3 files. They can all be downloaded free, though the link to the free RealOne player is a bit hidden on their site because there is a priced player too.

Stations may offer transmission at different speeds, usually from 24kbps upwards - you may have to choose, or there may be a default. Make sure the default is a speed you can cope with. Higher speed should bring better sound quality, though the file format used can affect that too. (For some background information on formats, see Internet radio for simpletons <http://www.operacast.com/simpletons.htm> and Internet radio for techies <http://www.operacast.com/techies.htm>). A 56k dialup service will normally cope pretty well with most services, but if you are paying by the minute you may not want to spend hours listening to radio programmes this way.

Radio 'tuners'

A tuner is software on your computer that gives a window (in the shape of a radio for Sonicbox) with a predetermined collection of stations in all subjects and arranged by genre. A tuner can be a convenient way of accessing many stations, but you will doubtless find you want to listen to others that are not included, so it can seem limiting. Only currently broadcasting stations are included - you will need to go to the station web

site for any that archive programmes.

The most popular tuners are vTuner <http://www.vtuner.com> and Sonicbox <http://www.imnetworks.com/imguide/imguide.epl>.

On vTuner you can browse formats (genres) and locations as well as searching. It notes recent stations you have visited and there's a list of new stations added. It also has some TV/video programmes - mainly for news and government, including some traffic webcams.The software costs $29.95, but you can have a free 15 day trial.

Sonicbox is similar, with a more restricted range of stations. You can set up your own list of regularly used stations. Searching is available by a search box on the iM Networks Web site. The software is downloadable free of charge.

Directories of radio stations

There are numerous directories of stations - I've concentrated on the most useful.

radio-locator <http://www.radio-locator.com/>.

Formerly the MIT list of radio stations on the Internet. Probably the most comprehensive list, with links to over 10,000 radio station web pages and over 2500 Internet stations.

Search for US radio by location city or zip state and by call letters. Browse Internet streaming radio by format and world radio by country. Search by: format, frequency, US state, Canadian province. Search results give lists of stations with a link to the web site where available and indicate if its Internet - some searches are only for US and Canada stations.

BBC Radio Player <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/aod/index.shtml>.

Archives of BBC radio programmes from various stations, including Radio Scotland and Radio Ulster, but not local radio. Programmes are usually available only until the next one in the series has been broadcast. Arranged by genre - mostly music but has drama - plays, serials, the Archers - and news - From Our Own Correspondent, World This Weekend, Today in Parliament, etc. BBC programmes can also be heard as they are broadcast - go to the station Web site, e.g. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/>.

Live365 <http://www.live365.com/index.live>

Has thousands of Internet-only stations, with many created by amateurs. (You can create one too!) Some are free to all; registration gives access to more and allows you to save your favourite stations and customize directory listings; a USD4.95 per month charge gives access to additional Live365 stations (as opposed to general Net stations) and removes the ads.

News and Information via Streaming Audio & Video <http://www.freepint.com/gary/audio.htm>

From ResourceShelf's Gary Price, this list is still under development and initially is focusing on English language news sources providing coverage of the current situation in Iraq. It has

the main news radio and TV stations from major countries. It replaces Gary's now out-of-date 'Current Awareness Resources via Streaming Audio & Video' to which there is a link.

PublicRadioFan.com <http://www.publicradiofan.com/>

Not as comprehensive a coverage as some. Programme finder by name or category - business, culture/arts, documentary, education, news, politics, talk, technology, world affairs. Lists those currently broadcasting or about to. Station finder - format (i.e. genre). What's on now list of programmes. Find what's going to be on. Favourites list.

SHOUTcast <http://www.shoutcast.com/>

MP3 files. Doesn't have a great deal other than music where there are 50+ categories. Allows search and browse and has a most popular stations list.

RadioTower.com <http://www.radiotower.com/>

Browse by country or category. There is a limited range of categories - only 17 stations in Talk.

Real <http://radio.real.com/>

Lists 110 stations under Talk - the rest are all music. Search by call letters, frequency, country or city, artist, any keyword. Browse genres. Some stations are free, but the RealOne basic RadioPass subscription ($5.95/month) gives access to over 3,000.

UK radio stations broadcasting on the Internet <http://www.radiofeeds.co.uk/>

brs web-radio <http://www.radio-directory.com/>

Predominantly US browse by format, country.

Comfm <http://www.comfm.com/live/radio/>

Categorises by themes (e.g. news, college), targets (e.g. senior) and moods (e.g. travel, inquire).

General Internet directories like Google Directory and Yahoo also list stations, but only selectively. They will point to other directories.

<http://directory.google.com/Top/Arts/Radio/Internet/>
<http://directory.google.com/Top/News/Alternative/Radio/?il=1>
<http://directory.google.com/Top/News/Internet_Broadcasts/Audio/?tc=1>
<http://dir.yahoo.com/News_and_Media/Radio/Programs/>
<http://dir.yahoo.com/News_and_Media/Radio/Stations/Web_Directories/>

Programme guides/schedules

There are no comprehensive guides to forthcoming programmes.

PublicRadioFan.com noted above is the most general in coverage, but is very selective. Otherwise individual station Web sites have programme details and you may find some

specialist listings like those at Operacast <http://www.operacast.com>.

FreePint readers in UK academic institutions or who are members of the British Universities Film and Video Council may have access to TRILT: Television and Radio Index for Learning and Teaching <http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/databases/trilt.html>. This database has UK television and radio programme details, including some local radio. You can browse or search lists of programmes or set up email alerts to receive weekly notification of forthcoming programmes of interest.

Also for the UK you can trace BBC programmes <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/>, or UK stations in general at MediaUK <http://www.mediauk.com/directory/radio/?schedules=yesplease>.

There's also a guide for BBC World Service <http://www.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/worldservice/psims/ScheduleSDT.cgi>.

Further information

The best guide to Internet radio is actually a book: Heberlein, L.A. "The Rough Guide to Internet Radio", 2002 <http://www.roughguides.com/internetradio/>.

It's an amazing collection of information and includes an extensive annotated directory, with an emphasis on specific programmes rather than stations. So you can find the useful: AIDS update on WPKN <http://www.wpkn.org> (Friday 8-9 Eastern Standard Time) and the more unexpected: the news in Tongan <http://www.rnzi.com> (Sun-Thur 19.40-19.55 GMT). It's probably a year since it was written so it will be getting dated in detail, but I find it quite inspiring!

GOLD

Last year Laurel J. Delaney gave some tips on how to do business in China - learn the customs, culture and know the market. Jacqueline Beattie's feature covered some important aspects you should consider when creating a customer service questionnaire and what then to do with the results.

- FreePint No.110 18th April 2002. "A World of Resources Awaits You in China" and "Customer Satisfaction - do you know what they think of your information service?" http://www.freepint.com/issues/180402.htm

In April 2001 our tips article looked at the problems encountered when trying to get connected in a rural location e.g. power surges and costs of setting up a network. Forget the TV, watch something online. Duncan Parry showed us how in his feature article.

- FreePint No.85, 12th April 2001. "Getting Connected in a Rural Area" and "Streaming Media and Broadband Sites" http://www.freepint.com/issues/120401.htm

Getting married? Take a look at Anne Ku's tips article in April 2000 on wedding sources online. Also in 2000, Martin White listed some Knowledge Management sites.

- FreePint No.60, 13th April 2000. "Wedding Sources on the Web" and "Knowledge Management" http://www.freepint.com/issues/130400.htm

"For anyone who has ever engaged in a fruitless search of the Internet and muttered to themselves, 'There must be a better way'" - Jennifer Davis explained how. Nigel Lees looked at environmental chemistry, market and business information on the chemical industry, as well as many other sites in the FreePint newsletter four years ago.

- FreePint No.36, 15th April 1999. "Cataloging the Internet: The Dublin Core" and "Idiots' guide to chemistry information resources on the Web" http://www.freepint.com/issues/150499.htm

In FreePint No.12 - A simple guide to modems written by John Garside. Also, Alison McNab "discovered a number of sites which offer background information on scientific research, science policy, and the public understanding of science".

- FreePint No.12, 16th April 1998. "The Duffers Guide to 56K Modems!" and "Sources of information on science policy and popular science topics" http://www.freepint.com/issues/160498.htm

Penny <penny@freepint.com>

FREE PINT BOOKSHELF
<http://www.freepint.com/bookshelf>

"Domain Names - A Practical Guide"
Written by Simon Halberstam, Joanne Brook,
Jonathan D.C. Turner
Reviewed by Helen Clegg

The world of domain names is a minefield. This book, published by Tolley's, one of the leading publishers in the area of tax, legal and business information, is a practical and thorough guide through that minefield.

The book is divided into six parts: Choosing and registering a domain name; Sale and transfer of a domain name; Changing domain name registration; Domain name disputes; FAQs and Appendices. Each part is further divided into numbered subsections, making citation and reference very easy.

As a relative newcomer to the world of domain names, I found the first section on registering a domain name particularly interesting and the easiest to read. It clearly takes the reader through the process of what to do when choosing a domain name registration company and registering the domain name. The authors point out the differences between different types of domain names and issues to consider when registering a domain name, for example, country code top level domains that mislead people such as .co which actually stands for Colombia rather than "company" and .dj which stands for Djibouti, not disc jockey. The first section also includes a whole chapter giving practical advice on registering a domain name as a trade mark, including the definition of a trade mark and how to go about conducting both UK and European trade mark searches. Given the importance companies are attaching to their intellectual property and brand names, this is extremely useful information.

Part B goes into detail regarding the selling and transferring of a domain name to another party. This includes model transfer agreements for both the vendor and the purchaser - useful if you are likely to become involved in such a process and want to know what will be involved. Also in section B is an interesting chapter on how to work out the value of a domain name in monetary terms, with a number of worked examples.

Part C is a very short section, taking the reader step-by-step through the process of changing domain name registration information. Part D, the largest section of the book, looks at domain name disputes, considering why they arise and what laws, dispute resolution policies and procedures are available to solve them.

This book is written by lawyers for lawyers, although it is certainly an excellent reference work for others such as IT managers, business and legal advisers, who may at some point have to deal with issues regarding domain names. Those used to reading texts dealing with legal matters will find this book easy to read; those who aren't may find it somewhat dry and hard going, although it is evident that the authors have tried hard not to use complicated legal terminology. As a marketing analyst, who at present has no involvement with my company's domain names, I would still include this book on my reference shelf and be ready to recommend it to colleagues who do. It covers all the important aspects, is from an authoritative source, includes sample documents and points out potential pitfalls in dealing with domain names. On the bottom of the book's front cover are three words "accuracy, clarity, value", which sum up this text perfectly.

Helen Clegg is Senior Marketing Analyst with R.R. Donnelley Europe, based in London. She has a B.A. Hons. in French and German and an M.Sc. in Library and Information Studies from Loughborough University. She is a Board Member of the European Chapter of the Special Libraries Association. Helen writes here in a personal capacity. She can be contacted at helen.clegg@rrd.com.

Related links:

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

- Read customer comments and buy this book at Amazon.co.uk <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0754514919/freepint0c>

- "Domain Names: a Practical Guide". ISBN 0754514919, published by Tolley Publishing, written by Simon Halberstam, Joanne Brook, Jonathan D.C. Turner

Free Pint Forthcoming Articles

* UK Freedom of Information Act 2000 * Internet Resources on IT * Writing for the Web * Business Continuity and Recovery - An Asian Perspective * Alternative Search Strategies * Online Discussion Groups * Charities * Children and the Internet * Risk Management * Vendors * Family History and Genealogy *

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>.

FREE PINT

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FEATURE ARTICLE

"Scenario Planning"
By Arthur Weiss

Arthur Weiss is the managing partner of AWARE, a competitive intelligence consultancy. He has a particular interest in linking information to strategy and helping organisations prepare for the future. Arthur has published papers, lectured and led seminars worldwide on competitive intelligence, marketing strategy, scenario planning and related topics. He is a member of the Society of Competitive Intelligence (SCIP) and a Chartered Marketer with the UK's Chartered Institute of Marketing. Arthur can be contacted through AWARE's web-site at <http://www.competitive-intelligence.co.uk>.

It was towards dusk on August 22nd, in the year 2028 when President Clinton received the news. Her father, William Jefferson Clinton was dead, three days after celebrating his 82nd birthday. The death was not unexpected: the doctors had not been confident that the xeno-transplant had succeeded following the ex-president's heart attack a week before. Chelsea thought back over her life and her father, and the events from when she first entered the White House as a child to when she returned as the second woman President.

But is this a forecast for the future? Scott Adams, in "The Dilbert Future" said that there are only two ways for predicting the future: "nutty methods" such as reading horoscopes, tea leaves, tarot cards or crystal balls, or methods that "put well-researched facts into a sophisticated computer... commonly referred to as 'a complete waste of time'".

Unfortunately, if you are in business, and want to stay in business, anticipating the future is one of the things you have to do. You need to know quantities to order, amounts to budget, the likelihood of some event or other occurring and so on. For the short-term - say one or two years, an extrapolation of current trends will often suffice, especially if you include an estimate of likely errors. However if you are looking 10 years, 20 years or even further ahead, or where there are no obvious trends, then a simple extrapolation is now no longer an option: the risk of getting it wrong is too great. Instead, you need to help decision-makers think about the future and what it holds.

Scenario planning is one tool that aims to do this, through the creation of stories about possible futures that can be used to guide strategies today.

Scenario planning is not a 'tea leaf'-type technique. It does not generate forecasts of the future, but instead, paints pictures of possible futures. The aim is not to sit back and wait for the future to happen, but to prepare for what might actually occur. Scenario planning allows decision makers to anticipate potential futures and prepare action plans today that will safeguard their organisations, tomorrow, whatever actually does take place.

The technique differs from most other forecasting tools in that it does not assume that the world tomorrow will be a straight extrapolation on what is happening today. Instead it looks at the total environment and how the different parts interact. It will combine near certainties of the future such as demographic trends, with uncertainties such as social, technological and political developments. A number of stories are created with each story mixing the certainties with some aspects of the uncertainties to give various outlooks on the future. The planner now looks at the organisation's strategies and matches them against each story to see how the organisation would fare should a particular scenario, or part of a scenario came true. Plans are then modified so that they can withstand whatever slings and arrows fortune should throw.

Scenario plans are NOT predictions! Although each scenario relates to a possible future, these futures are not certain. Instead the aim is to challenge thinking, enabling businesses to make more informed decisions. By adapting strategies to match each scenario, businesses prepare themselves for environmental changes that are already in progress, even if the end results are hidden today.

The technique has had notable successes. Shell Petroleum, an early adopter of the technique, showed the way by anticipating the 1973 oil crisis. The resulting strategies helped the company leapfrog their competitors to become and remain one of the major oil companies. In South Africa, the "Mont Fleur" scenarios helped move the country from apartheid to today's inclusive democracy <http://www.gbn.org/public/gbnstory/downloads/gbn_mont_fleur.pdf>.

The Global Business Network web site <http://www.gbn.org> is one of the best resources for learning about scenarios - and includes writings from some of today's pre-eminent scenario planners, and several examples and anecdotes. GBN members have also contributed items on other sites. For example, Lawrence Wilkinson, a co-founder of GBN, contributed to a Wired Magazine issue dedicated to the topic with an overview on how to build scenarios at <http://www.wired.com/wired/scenarios/build.html>. Another excellent primer on scenario planning was produced by the South Wind Design Company in 2001, and includes scenarios on the future of hand-held computers <http://www.swdi.com/ScenPlan.pdf>. The links between scenario planning and business strategy are outlined in an article by Tony Hodgson of Metabridge <http://www.metabridge.com/assoc/stratscen1a.html>. The Metabridge site also contains an article by Gary Chicoine looking at how we think about the future, and the dangers of not adopting the alternative-futures scenario planning approach, because of a natural tendency to focus on only a single future <http://www.metabridge.com/assoc/stratscen3.html>. A more detailed exposition on scenarios and the strategy process is an article by the GBN member, Kees van der Heijden which looks at how scenarios fit into the strategy process. It can be found at <http://www.library.nijenrode.nl/library/publications/nijrep/1997-01/1997-01.html>.

In the history of scenario planning, the Shell petroleum company features strongly. Shell have made a number of their scenarios accessible from the Shell web site <http://www.shell.com/strategy>. These include a longer-term view of energy requirements up to 2050. A history of scenario planning at Shell was reported in the International Journal of Futures Studies from 1996 <http://www.systems.org/HTML/fsj-v01/rd-f/rd-f-toc.htm>. This also includes other relevant material, including another overview of the aforementioned Mont-Fleur scenarios.

There are a number of scenarios available on the web. Some interesting scenarios have been produced looking at Europe up to 2010 <http://europa.eu.int/comm/cdp/scenario/index_en.htm>. Now old (they were completed in 1999), they present five alternative views on how the authors thought that Europe would change over ten years. Global trends up to 2015, including four scenarios, as seen by the US National Intelligence Council can be read at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/globaltrends2015/>. Revisiting such scenarios is always interesting in hindsight. Thus both the European and the US papers include mention of the threat of terrorism, including Islamic terrorism - but neither mention a "war against terrorism". This is understandable as both were written before 9/11. Scenarios are NOT forecasts, but guides to the future: many of the elements mentioned in both reports are now apparent. Decision-makers who had used these and similar reports would be better prepared for the world today (whose reality consists of elements from several of the scenarios), than those who just extrapolated forward from their current situation.

More recent scenarios, looking at business post-9/11 have been prepared by Accenture, entitled "Business in a Fragile World" <http://www.accenture.com/xd/xd.asp?it=enweb&xd=ideas\wef\wef_fragile.xml>. These take into account the current economic slowdown, the war on terrorism, and anti-globalisation movements, producing four scenarios aimed at helping business leaders think about how their businesses could prosper over the next ten years.

Rival consultancy, Deloitte, have produced a series of brief scenarios looking at a number of business sectors as part of their Strategic Flexibility framework for example, financial services <http://www.deloitte.com/vc/0,1639,sid%253D6970%2526cid%253D5628,00.html>, energy <http://www.deloitte.com/vc/0,1639,sid%253D1009%2526cid%253D10189,00.html> and life sciences <http://www.deloitte.com/vc/0,1639,sid%253D2222%2526cid%253D5484,00.html>. These also look at potential strategies and include the "Real Options" approach to selecting strategies.

Creating Scenarios

So, how do you create scenarios? The first stage is to decide the focus and timeframe. Some scenarios focus on a national or global level, many just look at an industry and some will focus on specific aspects of an industry, market segment or on a geographical region. The timeframe can also vary: if looking at a rapidly changing technology, the timeframe could be as short as five years although generally, scenarios cover longer periods.

The next stage involves a full analysis of the business environment impacting the selected focus, looking at: industry competition; technology; social attitudes; the economic situation; new legislation; as well as the geo-political situation and even issues such as climate change. Some factors will be almost certain: for example, a scenario looking at UK secondary education would need to take into account the fact that there will be 400,000 fewer children aged 10-14 in the UK in 2013 than there are today <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/pop2001/United_Kingdom.asp>.

Following the environmental analysis, a number of driving forces will be identifiable and the next step is to look at the potential impact of these driving forces, selecting those appearing to have the most relevance to the area being considered. These are then used as the basis for scenario construction. Scenario building is creative and not a quantitative exercise. The best scenarios read well and challenge the imagination. They are stories and not management reports. However, to be actionable, and usable for strategic planning, they also need to be believable and realistic -- not science fiction or impossible dreams. They should take account of certainties such as demographics, and the uncertainties that will only become clear as time passes. It does not matter if something appears improbable, so long as it is possible.

Having created the scenarios, the hard work really starts. Apart from setting up a process that looks for signals indicating change, the organisation needs to integrate the scenarios into their strategy planning, ensuring that plans are robust enough to withstand any adverse future events, and take advantage of opportunities that may arise.

Further Reading

There are several books on scenario planning and related topics.

Perhaps the best introduction to the topic is by Peter Schwartz of GBN - "The Art of the Long View : Planning for the Future in an UncertainWorld" <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0385267320/awarecompetitivi/>.

Also worth looking at are "Scenarios: The Art of Strategic Conversation" by Kees Van Der Heiden <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0471966398/awarecompetitivi/> and "Learning from the Future : Competitive Foresight Scenarios" by Liam Fahey <http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/ASIN/0471303526/awarecompetitivi/>.

Two seminal papers on scenario planning, by Pierre Wack, from the Harvard Business Review October and November 1985 issues ("Scenarios: Uncharted Waters Ahead", HBR, Sept/Oct 1985 and "Scenarios: Shooting the Rapids" HBR Nov/Dec 1985) can currently be downloaded at <http://wwwfl.ebs.de/Lehrstuehle/Wirtschaftsinformatik/NEW/Courses/Semester8/Strategy/#Schedule>, along with a couple of other relevant articles.

Have something to say?

If you know of a range of resources on a particular topic then why not contribute to FreePint?

<http://www.freepint.com/author.htm>