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Searching Through Embedded Databases

THE DAY OF THE standalone database may be numbered. Database searching is now embedded in the latest version of Microsoft Office software, so the process of looking for information is interwoven into writing a report or creating a presentation. Some corporate librarians wonder how this will affect their role.

Research in a few steps

Microsoft Office 2003 is aimed at office workers who want to do their work in as few separate steps as possible. Agreements with several information providers, including Factiva, LexisNexis, Ovid, Gale, and HighBeam (formerly Alacritude), allow users of Office software such as Word, Excel, Access, PowerPoint, and others to access a variety of high-quality information content from within each application.

When a worker who is using any of the Microsoft Office applications wants to search for information or verify a fact, choosing "research" from the tool bar or entering a Research Task Pane initiates a search process. Users can highlight words or phrases in their document by right-clicking on the words or select "look up" to open a research window and enter words in a search box. They then select the source or service they want to search (so the database selection process isn't totally missing). Microsoft Office then connects the user online to the selected resource.

Choices available in Microsoft Office are mostly from third-party content providers. Some are incorporated directly into the Microsoft system, such as the Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia, dictionaries, and a thesaurus. Office users are accustomed to this basic level of resource checking. But the most significant enhancement is the online access to

information that was previously available only by going directly to the database systems. These include newspapers, magazines, company profiles, medical journals, reference books, and legal resources—all from some of the biggest names in online services.

The most significant enhancement to Microsoft Office 2003 is the online access to information

Business content greatest

Business users will find the most relevant information. When the Microsoft Office user selects Factiva, they are sent to "Factiva Search," a special version of the Factiva system that allows simple word searching of Factiva's Publications Library collection of approximately 8000 news and business sources. Relevant articles or titles can be tagged and placed directly into the Microsoft document, spreadsheet, or presentation from which the user initiated the search.

The target audience of Factiva Search are competitive intelligence, public relations, marketing, and other company professionals who write business reports and need to incorporate external information into internal reports and compare it.

Individuals can get a low-cost credit card subscription to Factiva Search, but the most likely target is end users in companies that are already Factiva customers. Headlines from Factiva searches are provided for free, but Microsoft users must also be Factiva subscribers to get full-text articles. Likewise Gale Group's Company Profiles provides basic company data for free, with full profiles available as a subscription service or for a fee.

Legal and medical information

A version of LexisNexis is also available through Microsoft Office 2003. Searching court decisions is provided for free from the lexisONE legal portal, as is searching the 3400 LexisNexis "Bookstore" titles. Users who want to go beyond the free sources to search LexisNexis Shepard's Citation Service must pay as LexisNexis subscribers. The full system for LexisNexis subscribers is promised through Office soon.

Medical users will appreciate the ability to search the over 900 medical research journals from Ovid. Elsevier's Dorland's Medical Dictionary and Mosby's Drug Consult are both offered, as is Thomson's MICROMEDEX drug information system. Microsoft has put together in Office 2003 an entire suite of medical information, pharmacology, medical records, and other tools aimed at healthcare providers.

Embedded fears

It's not all for specialized users. HighBeam's eLibrary and encyclopedia.com are aimed at a general audience, including students, as well as business users. eLibrary's abstracts are free, but searchers must pay by credit card for full texts.

Because the most cost-effective use of these services is through a corporate-wide subscription, online searching through Office applications should be just another way for corporate librarians to help their users easily access the reputable online content they have purchased. Some corporate librarians may fear that embedded searching makes their role invisible. Many reference librarians teach users about choosing and searching databases, both of which embedded searching minimizes.

The main appeal of embedded searching is convenience, an important motivating factor for many end users. Smart librarians, particularly in the corporate world, are taking the initiative to bring embedded searching to their users, to point out the pros and cons of this one way of searching, and to offer additional search sources and services when convenience isn't enough.



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