NATURAL LANGUAGE SEARCH ENGINES

Natural language search engines are very appealing, as you can literally type in a question in the way that you would ask it. Ask Jeeves is probably the best known of these.

Table 3. Main types of search engine

Type of search engine	*Example*	*What it's most useful for*
Free text search engines	Google	When you know exactly what you want and can be specific about it. Good for 'Mercedes-Benz'; bad for 'performance cars'
Index-based search engines	Yahoo	An overview of the subject area, structured so that you can narrow down a search or make it broader. For example, from 'astrophotography' you can go up to the broader category 'astronomy' or down to the more specific 'lunar eclipse photography'
Metasearch engines	Dogpile	A broad and comprehensive view of sites in a subject area
Natural language search	Ask Jeeves	Good for novice searchers, or if you want a general look around a subject area
Specialist indexes	Omni	In-depth access to a highly specific subject area

Source: Information and Knowledge Management by: Elsevier Butterworth–Heinemann Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP 30 Corporate Drive, Burlington, MA

Table 3 summarizes the main types of search engines and what they are most useful for.

- **GETTING BETTER RESULTS**

Choosing the right kind of search engine for your purpose will go a long way towards getting better search results more quickly. There are a couple of other things you can do too.

- **ADVANCED SEARCH**

One of these is to take advantage of any advanced search facilities offered by the search engines. These should make your search more specific, and more likely to retrieve focused results rather than irrelevant hits (**false drops**).

For some search engines, such as Excite, HotBot and Lycos, this kind of search supports the use of **Boolean operators**. These sound alarming but are really quite simple, and consist of just three words which you can incorporate into your search phrase: AND, OR and NOT.

For example, 'bottling AND canning' will only produce results where *both* the terms 'bottling' and 'canning' appear in the same item.

OR will find all occurrences of the terms in your search phrase whether they are together or not. So 'bottling OR canning' will retrieve all items containing 'bottling', all items containing 'canning' and all items containing both terms. You will see from this that the effect of OR is to *broaden* your search, leading to a greater number of hits.

NOT is used to narrow a search. In our example, 'bottling NOT canning' will retrieve items which relate to 'bottling' but will exclude those which contain a reference to 'canning'.

- **BOOKMARKING**

Finding the information once is one thing; finding it a second time is another. Make full use of your bookmarking facility to set up topic folders that you can refer to later and update periodically.

Some tips for effective use of the Internet:

- Be prepared to put in some time at first to surf around and get a good idea of the main websites in your area of interest
- Try out different search engines to see how the results compare

- **KEEPING UP TO DATE**

Another important aspect of quality information for decision making is that the information needs to be up to date.

One way of doing this is by joining mailing lists and newsgroups in your area of interest. A good place to start is http://groups.google.com which offers a list of groups to browse in all subject areas.

- **(BOTS) OR INTELLIGENT AGENTS,**

The last few years have seen the rise of robots (**bots**) or **intelligent agents**, which can 'learn' your requirements and scurry around the Web looking for information on your behalf.

They are more effective than average search tools for two reasons (Edmunds and Morris, 2000):

- An intelligent agent can make decisions on the basis of the data it acquires without needing direct instruction from the user

Because it is able to learn about individual preferences, it can predict the likelihood of items it comes across being of interest.