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Of the many shortages our Panelists have learned to cope with in today's manufacturing environment, sources of job-related information is not one of them. Thanks largely to the Internet and its varied outlets, industrial information is plentiful, growing in volume and becoming ever-easier to access.

When asked how and where they find information that helps them do their jobs better, virtually all Panelists say they turn to the Internet in one or several of its many iterations; few say they use no electronic sources whatsoever. Despite the Internet's overwhelming coverage and acceptance, Panelists also say print sources—*magazines and books*—continue to play a key role in meeting their information needs. Here's how our group navigates today's rising tide of information:

Pushing all the buttons

Everything electronic is in the mix for Panelists—*Webinars, Websites, blogs, podcasts, even tweets*. Most often, though, it's Websites. Favorites include focused sites hosted by manufacturers, industry publications and associations, broad-appeal sites like LinkedIn, YouTube, eBay and, of course, the Google and Yahoo search engines.

Interestingly, social media outlets—*the interactive Internet applications that include blogs, microblogs (Twitter) and networking sites such as Facebook*—have not yet become a significant part of job-related information searches for most Panelists. Driving overall usage, they say, is typically their immediate need for searchable, reliable and, often, detailed information.

"I probably use the Yahoo search engine most frequently," says a reliability/maintenance engineer for a heavy manufacturer in the South. "I need it for parts information and to locate suppliers. It is very handy. I also use company Websites." This Panelist declines to rank his sources in terms of effectiveness, noting that their usefulness "depends on what I am after." He doesn't use social media because he finds "no use for these networks as they relate to my job." Similarly, another Panelist does not allow his crew access to social media "because it tends to distract employees away from procedures and tools already in place."

This perspective would be lost on a maintenance-engineering specialist in Canada who characterizes himself as having grown up in the digital age. For him, the Internet is king and he acknowledges turning to it for everything maintenance-related. "In the few places I've worked," he observes, "the type of information that most maintenance people hold valuable—*parts catalogs, installation and maintenance manuals*
—seems to be scarce. Sales reps will occasionally visit and deliver this type of print material," he adds, "but that has become less frequent as the way business is conducted has changed."

To obtain this type of information, this Panelist prefers Websites that provide the data in a browsing format as opposed to just downloading a PDF of the catalog. Highly valuable, he notes, are "companies that can provide CAD models of their products on the Website, free for downloading."

For a chemical-industry vice president in the Midwest, Webinars "seem to give the best bang for information needed. They provide company information," he says, "along with competitive data for review."
Panelists also find online discussions helpful: "I use LinkedIn to stay connected with colleagues," says a maintenance manager in the Midwest. "I follow certain discussion groups to see what topics are out there for new things and problems others may be having. I also visit magazine sites along with energy.gov, nfpa.org, osha.gov, smrp.org and vendor sites." He has also begun adding reference apps to his iPhone. Recent additions include "the Yaskawa Savings Predictor for calculating energy savings from using variable frequency drives and a new one from Martin Sprocket & Gear."

This Panelist agrees with others that the "most and least valuable information source really depends on the task I am trying to complete at the time." For staying up on general-item topics, he points to discussion-group alerts from LinkedIn as being helpful. According to him, the government sites he visits "are least valuable for day-to-day updates, but good for dealing with specifics."

A training coordinator in the Midwest cites industry-magazine Websites as the most worthy information sources. "These are the mainstay of my bookmarks in Google and Yahoo," he says. "Much of what I do is researching current 'hot' trends, and a monthly type of magazine works best to keep me updated." This Panelist's other Web sources include reliability forums and both trade-show and CMMS-industry sites.

Print is on the job

Like virtually all Panelists, the Midwest training coordinator above still receives Maintenance Technology and other maintenance magazines in print form, along with some facility and building-management. "I keep them in my training room with pages bookmarked for reference and ready reading when students attend
my class."

Similarly, the reliability/maintenance engineer for the heavy manufacturer in the South says he "frequently refers to magazine articles on maintenance strategies. We are in the midst of a PMO initiative here," he adds, "and I use this information to ensure we stay on the right path. We use books for strategy and planning advice as well."

Another turns to magazines to "get the latest information on tools and technologies," while the owner of a maintenance-engineering service says he keeps "past copies of various maintenance magazines on top of my desk for articles and vendor information. I used one just today," he notes, "to look up an article for a report I needed to do."

Connections to come

While the Internet has become integral for most business operations everywhere, not all Panelists can access it on the job. A PM leader for a heavy manufacturer in the Midwest, for example, says he does "not have access to electronic media sources at work on the floor, and I doubt we'll get it." His company does provide access for engineers who work off the floor. Nonetheless, this Panelist says if he needs to search online for job-related information, he must do it at home. "That's where I look for anything that will make my job—*or anyone's job*—easier," he says, listing magazine Websites and the University of Tennessee's manufacturing-themed Web pages as favorites.

"In my personal opinion," this Panelist adds, "if there is information out there that someone is sharing and it can be helpful, then bring it on! It would be an advantage if everyone would be more open-minded. Take off the blinders," he says, "and see all that is out there." Though he may not be fully part of it, all signs indicate that this is, in fact, very much the trend. **MT**

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