

WORKING THE WEB' - A brief guide to successful surfing

The World Wide Web (WWW) is the name for more than two billion individual web-pages which form part of the Internet. (The term 'Internet' refers to the WWW plus several other ways of transmitting electronic information across the globe, like e-mail).

The Web is packed with information – both useful and useless – but getting at what you want can be difficult. 'Surfing the Web' often feels more like 'Wading through Treacle'.

Essentially, there is no underlying structure to the WWW. A series of linked web-pages for an organisation are generally termed a 'web-site', but any page on the web can equally well be linked to any other in a totally dynamic way. These 'hyperlinks' between pages give the WWW huge power but also make it very chaotic.

However, there are three kinds of tools that can make navigating your way around and finding information relatively painless...

Web Directories (also called Internet Guides)

These provide lists of websites under category headings – like Business, Politics, Entertainment and Society - each with several levels of sub-categories so you can 'drill down' to more specific topics and details of actual sites.

No Web Directory will list more than a fraction of the sites on the WWW – but often they claim to have chosen the best ones and cut out the junk by having human editors look at the pages before including them.

Web directories are included as part of **www.yahoo.co.uk** and **www.google.co.uk**

Search Engines

If Web Directories are a bit like the contents page of a book, Search Engines are more like the index. The information they use is not compiled by humans but is based on a 'web-crawler' trawling through the words and phrases used on the WWW and creating a database. By using this information, Search Engines can point you to pages containing specific 'search terms' that you type in. The search engine comes back with a list of 'results' – suggestions of Web-pages which match what you want to find. Or not!

To get good results from a Search Engine, you need to know how to narrow down your search (see opposite). You need to allow for the fact that they do not consider the meaning and purpose of web-pages when indexing them, just the terms used in them. Also, spend time learning how to get the best from the *particular* Search Engine you plan to use (they work in different ways, so check the Help or Information page for tips).

Currently, the best available Search engine is Google - **www.google.co.uk**

WHICH TO CHOOSE

Whether it's best to use a **Search Engine** or a **Web Directory** will depend on what you're trying to find....

Web Directories are usually best if you want to find general sites or get an overview, e.g. those giving job vacancies. With **Yahoo UK**, you can 'drill down' through the levels:

Business and Economy > Employment and Work > Jobs > Company Job Listings ...

to a list of several hundred sites, made up of a combination of on-line job agencies and big companies which have pages of jobs listings.

Since someone at Yahoo has visited each of these sites before inclusion, there is a fair degree of quality assurance about the sites that are listed.

Search Engines are best if your topic is very specific, e.g. the website of a particular organisation which might have job vacancies.

With **Google**, typing in the search term 'Guardian' will bring up a list of sites which include the term 'guardian' (over a million in total), but ranking the newspaper's own site at the top. You can go straight to it at the click of a mouse button.

SEARCH ENGINE TIPS

If you are interested in snakes and want to use the search engine to find out about keeping pythons, simply keying 'pythons' as the search term, will generate tens of thousands of listed pages containing the word – and most of them will be about the cult comedy show 'Monty Pythons Flying Circus'! So, you will want to focus your search by using a combination of words, all of which you want on the page. Simply including 'snakes' will cut out most of the Monty Python pages (losing about two thirds) and using 'care' focuses on information on keeping snakes. Thus our search term should be something like 'pythons snakes care'. And, lo and behold, the top sites listed are all actually on the care of pythons!

To include a phrase in your search, put it in "double quotes". For example, using the search term "Abbey National" will return only those pages which contain that exact company title. Without the quotes, listings will include pages where the two words appear separately – e.g. 'Westminster Abbey must be considered a national treasure'.

Another common pitfall is overlooking the fact that most of the content on the Web is posted in the USA. If you want something in the UK or Bradford, it will help to specify that in your search term or use a Search Engine that specialises in indexing UK sites.

Other ways to find the web page you want

Some web pages are very low profile and hard to find. It's useful to actually understand why this is...

Often, users of the Web do not realise that entries made in many **Web Directories** are only compiled from *submissions* made by individuals or organisations. If a directory has not received a submission for a site, it will obviously not carry an entry for it. On top of that, directory compilers can be very choosy about who they list and may include only a fraction of the sites they know of.

Whilst **Search Engines** are compiled by computers which trawl the Web, many base their listings on 'invisible' information that the person setting up the site needs to put into a web page. If the author doesn't include good information for indexing, a site won't be listed or will be way down at the bottom of a list of thousands of results.

To combat these problems, we need to take advantage of the 'hyperlinked' structure of the Web.

Thinking Laterally

Almost every web page will link to others, making them just a mouse click away. Lots of websites have a 'links page', which lists several other recommended or related sites.

So, if you can't find the exact site you want from a Directory or Search Engine, think about finding a site that may link to it – or at least begin pointing you in the right direction.

Community Web Directories / Search Engines

You may be able to find themed web directories and search engines serving particular communities – e.g. Women's sites. Similarly, you can find geographically specific web directories – Bradford has an excellent one – the Bradford District Community Website – at www.bradford-net.com