A Day in the Life of an Independent Info Pro

Before I started my business, I didn't really know what to expect on a day-to-day basis. What would I spend my day *doing*? Since my prior work experience was as a corporate librarian, I knew what a day of research felt like, but I also suspected that working as an independent info pro had its own unique pace and feel.

Although I had heard this before, I did not really believe that a third to half of my day would be spent doing nonbillable work. But then I thought about it—almost every company has a sales department, a marketing staff, strategic planners, some administrative support people, an accounting department, *and* the employees who actually produce the goods or provide the services that the company's customers buy. In a one-person business, all those jobs have to be done by—you guessed it— you. Certainly, some efficiencies are achieved when you work solo, but you still have to bring in customers, keep them happy, and bill them—as well as provide the information services that those customers are paying for.

My Typical Day

So, what does a typical working day look like? There is probably no such thing as an average day; in fact, I would be happy if any given day were 100 percent predictable. But here is a composite diary of one of my days:

After an early morning walk with the dogs, a quick breakfast, and a scan of the newspaper, I braced myself for the 25-foot commute to my home office in the carriage

house above my garage. After putting on a pot of coffee to brew, I spent the first half hour going through e-mail and reading postings from the seven or eight e-mail discussion lists I subscribe to. I replied to a query from a program planner who wanted to know my availability and rate to speak at a conference in six months, giving her a list of possible topics. I sent a pre-written reply to someone who asked about starting an information business from home, and deleted the inevitable spam messages offering me free satellite TV service, porn, and 24.5 million e-mail addresses that I can use to spam others for only $99.

Then I settled down to the work of the day. I was in the middle of a project to identify the major buyers, manufacturers, and uses of optical amplifiers, a job commissioned by a corporate librarian who didn't have the time to do it himself. I had already looked through Web sites of the major manufacturers, so now I headed to the professional online services to see what I could find in the industry press, technical journals, and market research reports. I often start with Factiva.com (global.factiva.com) because of its favorable pricing, but this project struck me as one that required the wide variety and power search tools offered by Dialog (www.dialogweb.com). (If you aren't familiar with these resources, take a look at Chapter 29, Professional Online Services.) I found more information than I had expected, so I refined the search to get just what I thought the client would want, and had the results sent to my e-mail account.

While waiting for the e-mail to arrive, I ran a quick search on the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office's Web site for recent patents on optical amplifiers, and wrote up an analysis for my client, listing the number of recent patents granted to the major industry players. Then I headed for some sources that specialize in in-depth market research (MindBranch, ECNext, and MarketResearch.com) and downloaded tables of contents of the reports I thought my client might want.

By now, the results of my Dialog search had arrived in my e-mail inbox, so I downloaded the files, ran them through a word-processing macro to reformat the articles and strip out the carriage returns within each paragraph, and started going through the material. I deleted a few articles that weren't as useful as they first appeared, organized the rest, and did some simple formatting to generate a table of contents and make the material easier for my client to read. I noticed that two interesting articles were not available online in full text, so I sent a fax with the bibliographic citations to a document delivery company, which could arrange to have the articles photocopied, the royalties paid, and the material faxed to me by the end of

the day. (Note that I did not do this portion of the research myself; it is more cost-effective for me to outsource this kind of work to a company that specializes in it, and has someone stationed on site at a library that has the journals I need, than it would be for me to drop what I was doing and visit a local library in the hope that it would have what I'm looking for. The doc del company also handles copyright fees so that I don't have to try to figure out who gets paid what.)

I made note of several Web sites mentioned in the articles, finished off the rest of the Web research for the job, and wrote a cover letter and summary for the client. Then I put the project aside until later in the day. I like to let my work percolate in my head for a few hours to make sure I haven't forgotten anything. Besides, I had to wait for the two articles I'd ordered to arrive via fax from the doc del company.

Since it was the end of the month, I sat down to do my monthly invoices and pay my bills. I sent out reminder notices to two clients who were late in paying, and sent a thank-you note to a new client. Just as I was backing up my accounting file, I got a call from a colleague, a public records researcher out in California. "Wow," I thought, glancing at the clock. "Only 10:45. She's up early." She told me that she was digging up information on a scoundrel who, it seemed, was bent on defrauding half the state of Florida. She wanted me to run an online search to see if he or his wife were mentioned in any Florida newspapers in the past five years. We agreed on a not-to-exceed budget and deadline, and I thought to myself that my clients often send me interesting work, but rarely do they ask me to track down real estate crooks.

By now, the dogs had gotten restless, so I took them on a quick walk around the block. I saw the economist who lives across the street and also works from home, walking his dogs. There must be some mysterious canine schedule that requires walking at 11 A.M.

The dogs quieted, I settled down for some serious Web surfing. A public relations firm had hired me to develop the content for a business process reengineering (BPR) portal they were building for a client. I started out by looking through a few general business portals for leads: Business.com, the Librarians' Index to the Internet (www.lii.org), and Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com). All had valuable leads to BPR sources. I started collecting sites, annotating each as I went along. Before I got too far, though, the phone rang—a friend and private investigator who lives nearby asked if I wanted to go on a run. Why not? It was a beautiful day, and Rock Creek Park beckoned. We met in 10 minutes and spent the next hour running through the park and talking

about work. A quick shower and I was back in the office, the dogs moping because I hadn't taken them along this time.

I called a telephone researcher in Boston who was working on a phone project I'd subcontracted—obtaining standards for electrical power systems on ships—to see how the work was going and to find out if she needed any additional information from the client. As I expected, she had the project completely under control. She told me that she would have a report written, using my electronic memo format, and ready for me to send to the client by the end of the next day.

I put in another hour on the business process reengineering project, made some notes on what sites to check next, and then put the project aside. The client didn't need the material for another week, and other deadlines were looming.

I would be traveling to California in a couple of weeks to give a talk on trends in the information industry. Public speaking is one of the ways I market my business; not only does it establish my expertise, I use these talks as a way to collect names and business cards of prospective clients. I had already sketched out my presentation and set up a file folder where I tossed any interesting articles that I thought might be useful. Now I pulled out the folder, opened up a fresh PowerPoint file, and outlined the talk. When I was finished, I loaded the presentation onto my Web site, where I maintain a list of recent speaking engagements, and updated the page to include the latest talk. And, while it was fresh in my mind, I called the editor of one of the information industry magazines and asked if she would be interested in having me rework the presentation into an article, since writing for publication is another form of marketing that works well for me. We agreed on a deadline, word count, and fee, and I noted the assignment on my "writing deadlines" list that hangs on the wall next to the computer. I wouldn't start the article until after I gave the talk; I expected to get some useful feedback and ideas from the conference, and knew that I would want to incorporate those into the article.

Beep! The fax machine came to life, and spit out the two articles on optical amplifiers that I had ordered earlier from the document delivery company. I looked them over, added a comment to the executive summary, and sent the report to the client.

It was getting close to the end of the day, so I picked up the phone and called a new independent info pro I'm informally mentoring. We spent half an hour talking about her marketing strategy, how she was going to handle a difficult client situation, and a seminar she was planning to teach in a few months.

By now, the dogs had started nudging my elbow; it was time for their evening walk and they were getting impatient. I breathed a sigh of relief that they had refrained from howling during any of my phone calls during the day; they aren't always this well-mannered.

I started my backup program, which saves all new files onto a Zip disk, packed up some professional reading that I might or might not get to that evening, and steeled myself for the 25-foot commute back to the house.

Your Typical Day

Everyone's day is going to have its own rhythm. Info pros with children at home will have to factor in the interruptions of child care; with young children, that can have a serious impact on the amount of time you're able to put into your business. Info pros who provide public records or other hands-on research will probably spend much of their time out of their offices—in government agencies, libraries, archives, or other repositories of hard-copy information. Telephone researchers generally have much less freedom to leave the office in order to walk the dog or meet a friend for a long lunch or a run in the park, because they're often waiting for contacts to return phone calls.

Issues We All Face

Regardless of the type of information service you provide, some basic issues will remain the same. You'll have to figure out how to make the best use of every hour of the day. You'll spend a significant portion of your day doing work that can't be billed out to a client, such as marketing, staying in touch with colleagues, and handling administrative chores. That's all work that's essential, but that doesn't contribute to your bottom line, at least not directly. You'll be juggling a lot of different responsibilities, some of which you will probably enjoy and some of which you won't. The chances are slim that you will have an entire day uninterrupted by phone calls, the noisy neighbor who thinks that, because you're working at home, you aren't really busy, or other unexpected disruptions.

Even if you don't do online research, you will be using various software applications during the course of the day. You'll be writing up summaries of your research in a word-processing program; you'll probably be using a financial management

software package such as QuickBooks for basic accounting; you'll be checking and managing your e-mail with software such as Eudora Pro, Outlook, or Outlook Express, and I hope that you'll be using a file backup system—such as a Zip drive or CD—at least once a week, in order to save copies of all your business-critical files. Chapter 9, Software for Your Business, goes into more detail about what you'll need.

The consequence of relying on software, as most businesses do today, is that you are responsible for providing at least the first line of defense when your PC goes down. As an independent info pro, you have no in-house help desk, no friendly computer geek down the hall who can wander by and figure out what's wrong. If your printer experiences a meltdown, your phone line suddenly goes dead, or your PC displays the Blue Screen of Death—every Windows user knows about this, the "Fatal Error" message that means whatever you were working on has just been eaten by your computer and you will now have to reboot—you're on your own. Most of us develop a good relationship with a local computer pro who is reliable, willing to make home-office calls, and who understands that if our PC is down, our business is down, too.

Eternal Verities in the Life of an Independent Info Pro

✦ Time management is essential. If you're not reporting to a boss or working on a regular 9–to–5 (or whatever) schedule, it's easy to let time get away from you.

✦ You switch hats constantly. You need to be able to mentally put one job on hold while you deal with other projects or concerns, then pick up the first job where you left off.

✦ It's critical to set aside time to get some exercise or otherwise refresh yourself. Work can easily take over your life, and that's no way to live.

✦ There's a lot of overhead and administrative time in running your own business.

✦ No matter how busy you are, you never stop marketing. The format may change—you may rely more on marketing efforts that reinforce word of mouth after your business is well-established—but you will continue to do some form of marketing as long as you are in business.