

What's an Independent Info Pro?

What's This Business All About?

I assume that you have some notion of what the independent information profession covers—finding, organizing, and managing information—or you wouldn't have picked up this book. But different people define this profession differently, and it is a common misconception that most research can be done on the web. While the internet *has* radically changed how independent info pros operate, much of our work involves research outside the portion of the web that most people are familiar with—that is, beyond what you can find by typing a few words into your favorite search engine.

In the most general terms, independent information professionals work for themselves or as partners in a two- or three-person business; they provide information services, such as research, analysis, information management, or consulting services, and they charge their clients for their services, either per project or on an hourly or daily basis. Many independent info pros worked as librarians or researchers before launching their own businesses; they may have spent years honing their research skills within large corporations or research centers. Others started out as professionals in other fields—lawyers, engineers, or marketing consultants, for example—then shifted their focus to providing research support to others within their profession. What all successful independent info pros have in common are strong entrepreneurial skills. They enjoy the challenge of building a business, they excel at managing their clients, and they are self-motivated. They didn't all start out as natural entrepreneurs, but they were willing to hone their business skills in order to succeed.

The independent information profession is a wide-open field; there are far more potential clients out there than people providing research and analysis services to them. No one has accurate numbers on the total number of independent info pros in the marketplace. The Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP; www.aiip.org), the trade association of the profession, has about 700 members. But this total does not accurately reflect the total number of independent info pros in business at any point in time; probably 10 times as many exist who aren't AIIP members. A fairly high turnover rate prevails among independent info businesses, reflecting the entrepreneurial world as a whole, in which, according to many studies, more than half of all small businesses fail within the first year and 80 or 90 percent of all businesses close within five years.

People who leave the independent info pro field usually cite one of the following reasons:

- They miss the daily stimulation of a more traditional office environment.
- They have difficulty dealing with the dramatically fluctuating cash flow.
- They don't enjoy the amount of administrative and marketing work required.
- They no longer have the passion and energy for the business that they had initially.

I have been an independent info pro for nearly 30 years, and I have watched a number of colleagues' businesses start up and then shut down. Often the closing of the business results in unexpected successes—formerly independent info pros re-enter the more traditional work force with newly acquired business skills and often find that they are much more valuable to employers because of their experience running a small business.

So What Do You Do, Anyway?

The independent information profession encompasses a wide variety of services. This section includes brief descriptions of many of the most common types of services offered by info-entrepreneurs. Most independent info pros specialize in a particular kind of research and focus on a specific industry or vertical market. Many of

us have a wide range of clients—mine include consultants, engineers, ad agencies, executives from *Fortune* 100 firms, lawyers, and web entrepreneurs, among others—but most of us focus on a specific market or niche. What all my clients have in common is that they call me for strategic business information. Other independent info pros may target the healthcare industry, architectural firms, the pharmaceutical market, or the IT industry. While many of us also have clients outside our primary market, we tend to target our marketing efforts on a specific subject area or industry. Note that some of the information services described here, particularly document delivery, are more likely than others to serve clients across vertical markets.

Web Research

With the prevalence of databases on the web, most independent info pros who provide research services of any sort include at least some web-based research in their portfolios. That may include locating government statistics on international trade, analyzing company filings at the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, or scanning blogs for discussion of a consumer product. Info-entrepreneurs use social networking sites such as LinkedIn or Facebook to identify experts to interview as well as to build their network. They mine email discussion groups and online forums to identify key opinion leaders.

The key element is that info-entrepreneurs don't just throw a few words into a search engine and retrieve exactly what their clients want. While being a good web searcher is essential to just about any research business, that alone will not provide the skills needed to provide high-end, high-value research to clients. But even projects that do not appear to focus on web research usually require some web aspect:

- A client wanted a strategic overview on the iced tea market in the U.K. As I expected, most of this work required identifying in-depth market research reports and searching the fee-based online services. However, as I was creating a table with the key features of each of the beverage companies, I realized that I had to analyze the messages of each brand. That required drilling deep into each company's website to see how each positioned its brand.
- I was asked to gather information on the vacuum-insulated panel (VIP) industry; VIPs are what keep refrigerated trucks cold, medical coolers cool, and your house warm. Part of my research involved identifying the major players in this field, and one of my approaches included searching in the

U.S. Patent & Trademark Office's database of patents, on the assumption that companies with multiple patents in this field are probably big players in the VIP industry.

- An entrepreneur who wanted to create a network of highly influential executives asked me to identify the 10 most influential chiropractors in 15 cities. While much of the work for this project was telephone research, I used an add-on for Google Maps to show where each of the chiropractors was located and the relative population density and household income of each location—something that added substantial value to the results of the telephone work.

Online Research

While the depth of information on the web can sometimes feel overwhelming, the professional online services described in Chapter 34 are even richer sources of information than the free or public web. These databases include material that never appears on the web, and they provide sophisticated search tools and value-added features that enable users to conduct in-depth research in ways not possible on the web.

Using the professional online services can be an expensive proposition. These services charge by the search, by the document, by the amount of time you spend connected to them, or by various other pricing algorithms. As an independent info pro, you pass along the online expenses to your clients, and these costs can sometimes add up to a third or more of the total project cost. Note that there is very little demand in the marketplace for independent info pros who only provide web research without in-depth analysis and other added value. The public perception, whether or not it's correct, is that it takes no great skill to search the web. We set ourselves apart by offering access to online research sources not generally available to our clients and by using uncommon, lesser-known, and complex web-based sources.

Public Records Research

Although much consternation has arisen recently about supposedly easy access to personal information on the web, a great deal of information about individuals has always been available in court clerks' and county recorders' offices and other

government agencies. Some of these records are now available on the web, but many still reside only in print files. Public records research includes:

- Reviewing bankruptcy filings to determine what assets are held by a corporation
- Conducting a pre-employment check of a school bus driver to make sure he has no criminal record or driving offenses
- Looking through articles of incorporation to identify the executives of a privately held company
- Finding prior court testimony given by an expert witness to determine how she is likely to testify for an upcoming case

Public records research is not for the faint of heart. It often requires a private investigator's license, it requires a good understanding of the ins and outs of various government agencies, and it takes a gut sense to know when you have found all the pieces of the puzzle. See Chapter 36, *Public Records Research*, for more information.

Telephone Research

Despite the much-talked-about “information explosion,” a lot of information never appears in print or in any electronic format. Sometimes, the fastest way to obtain such information is simply to call an expert in the field and ask. Telephone research is an art form, and many independent info pros—myself included—don't have the necessary combination of charm, patience, persistence, and chutzpah, and the ability to talk to anyone about anything. This type of work tends to involve more hours per project and a longer turnaround time than other types of research because of its very nature. Merely identifying the person who can answer your question might involve 10 or 15 calls. When you factor in the inevitable delays brought on by voice-mail tag and varying business schedules and time zones, it means that very few telephone research projects can be completed in less than a week, even if the total amount of time spent on the phone is only a fraction of that time.

The kind of telephone research I am talking about here requires more sophisticated research techniques than just running through a list of survey questions with a preselected list of contacts. Usually, you will get an assignment to find out about a specific topic, and you will have to develop your own leads. That means

some preliminary web, online, or library research to identify likely sources for the information, as well as deciding on the best way to approach the project and exactly what questions to ask.

Telephone researchers get much of their work from researchers within organizations and in the form of referrals from other independent info pros. From a marketing point of view, networking is particularly important in order to develop a large client base of subcontracting sources. Chapter 35 goes into more detail about what is involved in telephone research.

Library Research

When the independent information profession began, much of our research involved going to libraries on behalf of clients. Some projects still call for library research or, similarly, contacting information centers or other brick-and-mortar collections of material. An info pro might travel to a government agency's information center to search a database not available on the web, email a university library in Sweden to find a copy of a doctoral thesis, arrange to visit a trade association's library to use its specialized collection, or review records in the U.S. National Archives to determine how a particular site was used by the U.S. Army 50 years ago, in order to determine what hazardous materials may still be lurking in the soil and groundwater.

As more government agencies, embassies, associations, and other resources make their information available on the web, demand for hands-on library research has diminished. On the other hand, library research can sometimes unearth information not available anywhere in electronic format. I recently browsed through the membership directory of AIIP, looking at the listings for "unique collections" that members could access. Entries ranged from the Cornell University library of veterinary medicine to the Public Relations Society of America library, the Italian Patent and Trademark Office, the Georgia state archives, and the World Bank.

One of the difficulties in offering library research is that it requires a fair amount of overhead time going to and from the library away from your office. Chapter 15, *Setting Rates and Fees*, discusses how to set a price for your time; keep in mind that it can be difficult to find clients willing to pay your professional hourly rate.

Document Delivery

Tracking down obscure citations and obtaining copies or originals of articles, reports, and books is the job of document delivery (doc del) firms. Unlike most other

types of independent information businesses, doc del firms may employ a number of people, due to the amount of clerical and paraprofessional work involved. A doc del company acts, in a sense, as a librarian's—or researcher's—librarian. Once an info pro has identified the white paper, academic treatise, industrial standard, conference paper, 20-year-old annual report, or obscure article from a Polish medical journal that the client needs, the doc del firm's job is to get a copy of the item. Sometimes that means searching online library catalogs to find an institution that subscribes to the journal or maintains an archive of old corporate annual reports, and arranging to send someone to that library to photocopy or scan the material. Sometimes it involves contacting the publisher and negotiating an appropriate royalty payment for a copy. Sometimes it means tracking down the original author or conference speaker to see if he is willing to supply a copy of his paper or presentation.

Many doc del clients are librarians looking for material they don't have in their own collections and may not have been able to find through their own network of sources. That means that doc del firms often get difficult, incomplete, or incorrect citations. So part of the job of a good doc del researcher is to think like a detective. To an extent, doc del firms are threatened by the perception that "it's all available on the web." People are sometimes not willing to wait a week for an article when they are accustomed to getting material at the click of a mouse. And customers often balk at the price for document delivery; an article can easily cost \$25 or \$50, once the publisher's royalty fee is included in the invoice. Document delivery is a specialized niche for people who are detail-oriented, able to generate and manage large volumes of orders, and can identify clients willing to pay the often substantial fees.

Competitive Intelligence

Despite rumors to the contrary, competitive intelligence (CI) doesn't require industrial espionage or diving into dumpsters and digging up a company's strategic plans from the trash. What CI *does* involve is using a variety of research and analytical skills to gather information on a company or industry and to figure out what it means and identify risks and opportunities. CI research may tackle questions such as "Why are my competitors pulling back from Asia," "How should we interpret a competitor's price cuts," or "What are our threats from new entrants or new product launches." Some of this information is available via in-depth online research—in market research reports, industry newsletters, published interviews with executives, and so on. But much of this type of intelligence resides in more obscure sources, so CI

research may involve, for example, researching public records to find factory blueprints filed with construction permits, monitoring company websites to see what jobs are being advertised or what new offices or divisions have been opened, or conducting telephone interviews with a target company's vendors, customers, and competitors.

CI often includes analyzing research findings and developing conclusions regarding a company's strategies. CI researchers find it challenging to dig up hidden information without compromising the confidentiality of their clients and without misrepresenting themselves. In fact, this is one reason why CI research may be outsourced to independent information professionals; the CI department within a company doesn't want its employees associated with the research and prefers to have an independent researcher (with an independent perspective and set of assumptions) making those probing phone calls. Good CI researchers are able to think creatively, question all their assumptions about the industry and marketplace, recognize significant outliers, see the big picture as well as the details, and provide high-end analysis of a situation.

The principal professional association for this type of research is the Society of Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP; www.scip.org). SCIP members include CI researchers and analysts within organizations, CI consulting firms, and academicians in business and related disciplines. The Special Libraries Association (SLA; www.sla.org) also has a Competitive Intelligence Division, which is a particularly good resource for the research aspects of CI.

Nonprofits/Prospect Research

When you hear the word "nonprofit," what do you think?

- Hey, that describes my business right now!
- "Nonprofit" means "no money."
- Don't they just rely on volunteers for everything?

While that first thought may feel accurate, nonprofits are a great source of business for some info-entrepreneurs. Although their goals aren't to make a profit, that does not mean that nonprofit organizations are poorly funded; they may well be willing to pay market rates for your services. Yes, the local gardening club is a nonprofit without much of a budget, but the American Red Cross is also a nonprofit, and

it has a multibillion-dollar budget. And while the local animal shelter relies on volunteers for most of its services, the World Wildlife Fund spends \$2 million a year on professional fees.

Also within the nonprofit world are professional and trade associations, many of which are well-funded. The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) sponsors almost a thousand conferences a year for its 400,000 members, and it is involved in developing industry standards and in publishing hundreds of journals and annual conference proceedings. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) also fall within the realm of nonprofits. NGOs, often funded by governmental organizations, include NATO, the United Nations, and the World Bank. With budgets in the billions, NGOs can be sources of significant business to info pros who are able to identify the points at which their services would be most valued.

Nonprofits have the same concerns any for-profit company has: They need to bring money into the organization, they spend money on products or services, and they produce something, either tangible or intangible. For example, Samsung Electronics brings in money through sales of its products; it spends money in developing, producing, and selling its products as well as marketing to its customers; and it produces electronic devices. Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) is funded primarily by charitable foundations and wealthy individuals; it spends money providing its medical services, lobbying, and attracting and maintaining donors. It also provides medical aid and advocates on behalf of those it serves. Both organizations need to bring money in, spend it, and create something of value to others.

The services that info-entrepreneurs provide to nonprofits are similar to those they offer other clients, but the focus is often different. Priorities for nonprofits include identifying sources for funding, building membership, developing the skills of their board members, staff, and volunteers, and communicating with their various stakeholders. Info-entrepreneurs provide services to nonprofits such as:

- **Prospect research:** This involves researching major donors to identify their capacity for and propensity to giving and opportunities for a major gift program. What other organizations have these individuals given to recently? What is the individual donor's estimated net worth? What grants has this foundation made to groups similar to ours? What corporate giving programs could we tap into?

- **Grant writing:** Many nonprofits depend on grants for much or all of their funding. They need info pros to identify likely donors, research the organization, and identify its funding priorities and frequent grant recipients, and write the grant proposal in a way that is compelling to the funding organization.
- **Consulting services:** Nonprofits are notoriously strong in their own area of expertise and dismally weak in the area of management and administration. Info-entrepreneurs offer training services to help the staff conduct better prospect research. They help identify prospective advisory board members and executives. They even help the organization develop information services for its members.

Information Management

While most independent info pros specialize in particular types of research, some provide more general consulting services related to the acquisition, organization, management, and distribution of information within organizations. These consultants may provide “information audits”—in-depth surveys and analyses of an organization’s information needs and resources. They may offer recommendations on what information sources should be acquired, how these sources should be distributed within the organization through intranets or other technologies, and how to teach employees how best to use the information. Information consultants also help set up information resource centers and libraries, develop websites and databases to organize and disseminate internal and external information, and offer workshops and training sessions on information-related topics. Most information consultants come from a library or information services background. Since most of their clients are in the information field, having a deep familiarity with information resources is key to providing information management consulting services.

Library Staffing

Libraries within organizations, sometimes called “special libraries,” need occasional assistance and guidance in recruiting new staff or finding temporary help during a busy period or while a staff member is on leave. In fact, some organizations want the entire library function handled by a third party, preferring to pay a set fee to have all the staffing responsibilities managed by someone who understands the information profession, rather than trying to build and staff the library internally.

Library staffing companies usually focus on a single geographic region or a vertical market—government libraries or engineering firm libraries, for example—because it is difficult to maintain staffing quality when the client libraries are all over the country or all over the map in terms of specializations. With the exception of firms that only do library personnel recruitment, most staffing companies consist of the principal(s) and a number of information professionals. Thus, one of the skills that these types of independent info pros need is the ability to manage and motivate employees. This is one skill that those of us who are one-person businesses do not have to develop. Note that many of the issues related to outsourced personnel management services go beyond the scope of this book. If you are considering this type of business, be sure to expand your reading to include material on these other concerns as well.

Training and Seminars

Finally, a number of independent info pros offer training, workshops, or seminars on research-related topics, in addition to other information services. They often find that these are good vehicles for marketing their expertise, expanding their client base, and keeping their information skills sharp. (There's nothing like knowing you will be speaking in front of a room full of people to encourage you to stay up-to-date on whatever topic you're speaking on.) Some independent info pros work their seminar schedule around trips they have already planned—to professional conferences, meetings with clients, and the like—and they handle all the marketing, registration, and administrative tasks involved in organizing and promoting their sessions.

Others work with the organizers of existing professional conferences to present their workshop as pre- or post-conference sessions. They piggyback on the attendance and marketing effort of a larger conference, but they give up a portion of their income in exchange for having someone else handle all the marketing. In fact, info pros who give pre- and post-conference workshops are usually just paid a flat fee, regardless of the number of people attending the session. The stand-alone route works best if you already have some name recognition and/or a large base of contacts you can market to; generating interest in your workshops from scratch is difficult, time-consuming, and expensive. Another option that some info-entrepreneurs take is to provide customized workshops to large organizations or professional associations, offering to travel to various offices or locations or, alternatively, to develop digital learning products such as webinars, distance-learning seminars, online meetings, and tutorials.

However you decide to approach it, workshops and seminars can be a source of supplemental income if you are a lively speaker and can develop presentations that pique people's interest. And don't worry that you are giving away the store by teaching others your research techniques. The skills that got you to this point will keep you ahead of the pack. More importantly, most of your clients will be calling you for work because they know you have years of expertise that can't be acquired or taught overnight. Teaching others about research helps to build their appreciation of what is involved in your work and enables them to do simple research themselves.

Focus, Focus, Focus

It can be rather daunting to think about all the kinds of information services that independent info pros can provide. However, I don't think anyone offers *all* the services I just described. The late Sue Ruge, one of the founders of the independent information profession, was well-known for her advice to "do what you do best, and hire the rest." Many independent info pros put this in practice every day as they subcontract work to fellow info pros. For example, I focus primarily on online research, and I use a small network of colleagues for all of my telephone research and document delivery work. Several public records researchers call me when they need online searches to supplement what they can do themselves. When I get calls for information audits or knowledge management consulting, I refer them to a couple of people I know who are experts in that area. This informal network ensures that all of us are able to offer a wide range of high-quality research to our clients by tapping into the skills of other info pros who can provide what we do not. This is, I believe, the best reason to join AIIP; the contacts I have made there have enabled me to provide a much deeper, richer range of services to my clients than I could possibly do on my own. See Chapter 16, Subcontracting, or I'll Scratch Your Back If You Scratch Mine, for more discussion of how these relationships work, how subcontractors get paid, and who gets to keep the client at the end of the day.

Where Will I Find My Clients?

I am oversimplifying a bit, but your clients will probably be some combination of the following:

- Information-hungry professionals, such as CI researchers, marketing professionals, and product managers
- Intermediaries such as other consultants who will pass your work along to their clients
- Organizations that do not have an in-house library but need professional research support
- Librarians who need to outsource some of their research
- Individual professionals with more money than time and a specific research need

You might find these people in advertising and public relations agencies; research, strategic planning, and marketing departments of large corporations; nonprofit organizations, private investigation firms, engineering companies, hospitals and medical research facilities; and among upper-level executives who need outside research on their competitors and the industry.

Real-Life Examples

So, what does an actual research project look like? I asked several colleagues to describe a project they had done, and the following are their examples. These are quite extensive in their scope; any part of one of these projects might constitute a separate research job. And each example shows a different type of research—online, public records research, or a combination of information sources. Some of the details have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the clients.

Color Printer Market

Objective: A client needed to learn what business consumers thought about the quality of their desktop color printers. Did they expect the same quality as traditional photographic film processing? Did they generally just use color printers to add pizzazz to a marketing brochure or sales chart? What did they like and dislike in color inkjet printers?

Research: I searched a number of online databases to see what was written in the trade press about color printers and about consumer purchases and use of digital cameras. I also searched market research report databases to find consulting reports

on the color printer market. I searched the web for product specifications for various color printers and for discussions of these printers in various web-based forums and online bulletin boards. I monitored several bloggers who follow this industry closely. After I had pulled all the material together—more than 300 pages of information—I wrote an analysis of the major concerns of consumers and an executive summary for my client to provide to her vice president.

Total time: 40 hours

Finding Funding

Objective: My client, a public/private consortium, needed to identify potential sources of grants and funding in order to expand its efforts in recruiting information technology (IT) companies as tenants for a new “technology village” office complex as well as to train IT workers directly.

Research: I started with a general web search and identified a model program in another state. On its website, I found program descriptions and contact information so my client could talk with them directly. I searched the U.S. Department of Education’s website and found two federal funding initiatives. I also found information on a new bill in Congress that would have a direct impact on my client’s program and looked up information on the chief sponsor of the bill. It turned out that one of my client’s senators is very interested in this issue, so I called her office and obtained further details. I also searched the Foundation Center’s database and identified a number of relevant grant programs. I ended with an in-depth search in one of the professional online services for success stories of companies announcing funding they had received for on-the-job training of IT workers.

Total time: 25 hours

Automobile Aftermarket

Objective: A client that manufactures automobile accessories—hubcaps, chrome wheels, fog lights, and so on—is considering acquiring a privately held competitor. It needs as much information as possible on the competitor.

Research: I went to the state Department of Corporations and looked up the company records to get information on the officers and directors. Then I went to the courthouses in three local jurisdictions and looked up court documents to see if I could find any litigation involving the company or its officers. I found a suit filed by a former employee regarding an alleged breach of an employment contract, and

contacted the ex-employee to find out what she had to say about the company. I also found a divorce suit involving an officer of the company; the settlement agreement listed company assets and gave me additional details on the spouse's involvement in the company. Finally, since this industry uses a lot of plastics and paints, I contacted the state environmental protection agency and got the permits the company had filed for its manufacturing plants. This gave me information on the number of employees at the plants and the type of equipment used. I wrote all this up and gave the client the information I had gathered, along with suggestions on other sources of information we might be able to pursue.

Total time: 16 hours

Frequently Asked Questions

I speak and write frequently about the independent info pro business, and some questions seem to come up all the time, either from people who are considering this line of work or those who are thinking about hiring an independent info pro.

“How can you sell me someone else's information?”

Most independent info pros don't specialize in original research; that is, they don't spend all their time conducting surveys, studying trends, and writing their own market research reports. Instead, they gather information from a number of sources, including the web, trade and professional journals, newspapers, magazines, government agencies, associations, blogs, social network groups, and other sources. What they are charging for is not the information per se but their time and skill in *finding* the information, in knowing where to go to find it, and in making sense of the information after they find it.

That's why an independent info pro still charges even if he didn't find the information that exactly answered the client's question—the client is paying for the info pro's time and expertise, not just for the information retrieved. Compare it to going to a doctor for an illness; you pay the doctor for her time regardless of whether you were eventually cured. Unlike real estate agents and personal injury lawyers, few independent info pros work on a contingency basis, hoping to cash in big if their client finds the information particularly useful.

“Why do you charge me when it’s all free on the web?”

Three words: Time Is Money. Well, that’s the smart-aleck answer, anyway. And, indeed, an independent info pro should be able to find useful, accurate, and relevant information in less time than her client can. But more to the point, most information is *not* available on the free web. It’s hidden in databases that don’t show up in search engines. It appears in articles and white papers that never make their way to the web. It’s found in government and association reports that are hidden deep within websites. It’s buried in a book chapter or periodical article housed only in a library somewhere, or in a document filed in a county courthouse. Or it’s unearthed by doing telephone research, interviewing experts to get their take on a given situation.

In addition to finding information that simply never shows up in a web search engine, independent info pros also add value by analyzing and synthesizing the results—by providing not just information but answers.

“What if you don’t find any information?”

There are really very few research projects for which no information exists. You might not be able to find the exact answer. My guess, for example, is that no one knows the exact value of all the personal property of U.S. residents—and yes, this was a real research question. However, a good researcher can often find enough information to deduce or extrapolate an answer. To use the example just mentioned, useful statistics from insurance industry associations and from the U.S. Census Bureau enabled the client to make an educated guess.

And sometimes finding no information is just what the client wants to hear. If a client has invented a new infrared, hands-free potato peeler, he would be delighted to hear that I can find no existing patents for similar inventions. If a company is considering marketing its new children’s pager to parents in western Canada, it will be pleased to learn that no Canadian newspapers or parents’ magazines have mentioned a similar product in the past five years.

As I mentioned in the answer to “How can you sell me someone else’s information?” independent info pros charge for their time and research skills rather than for the quantity of information retrieved. Of course, if you find, partway into a project, that you aren’t uncovering anything useful, it makes sense to stop and consult with the client about expanding or changing the focus of the research.

“What training or education is required?”

Many longtime independent info pros have master's degrees in library or information science and years of experience as professional librarians. A number of graduate library schools are developing new programs that cater to the entrepreneurial interests of their students, some of whom have no interest in working within a traditional library after graduation. Some of the best programs also offer distance-learning options, which enable students to get the skills they need without leaving home.

However, a library background isn't required, provided you have other experience as a researcher or you are willing to outsource the actual research to others. Perhaps most important is the ability to use a wide variety of information sources, including the professional services described in Chapter 34, and to think creatively about how to find the information needed.

Another option is to outsource the complex research and analysis to subcontractors, and to focus your time and energy in marketing your business and cultivating your clients. Sue Ruge, the owner of three successful independent information companies, focused all her energy on marketing and relied on a group of employees and subcontractors to do the research for her clients.

In addition to research skills, you have to be able to run a business. That means marketing yourself; developing and implementing a strategic business plan and a yearly marketing plan; handling the day-to-day operations of a small business including invoicing, collections, accounts payable, and cash flow; continually upgrading your information skills through professional development; and managing your clients. You need good communication skills because you will be talking with clients face to face, over the telephone, or via email, and you will be writing analyses, summaries, and reports.

You can subcontract some of these duties, but one thing you can't easily subcontract is marketing. No one knows your skills, abilities, and talents as well as you do, and no one can establish clients' confidence in your abilities better than you. If marketing isn't your strong suit, consider finding a business coach who can work with you to develop a marketing strategy that is comfortable for you. I had no background in marketing when I started my business, but I developed the attitude that this was simply part of the job, and I could either figure out how to find an enjoyable way to market myself or I could choose to be miserable. Fortunately, I picked the former option. I go into detail about marketing techniques in Section Three.

“Will you hire me? Can I intern for you?”

Many aspiring independent info pros hope to hone their skills by working for established information businesses. Unfortunately, very few independents can absorb the overhead required to train new info pros and, more importantly, the inevitable cost of their “learning experiences”—known to clients as mistakes. We have to stand behind the work that goes out under our name, and that means we need to have complete confidence in the research. It is difficult to develop that level of trust with someone we haven’t known for period of time or who hasn’t developed an expertise in the resources used.

Most of us work from our homes or in one-room offices outside the home and don’t have the room and equipment to accommodate a new employee or intern. Most importantly, we are already busy providing information services to clients, as well as marketing and handling the administrative end of the business, and we just don’t have the time to guide and train someone who isn’t already an experienced information professional.

The one exception to this rule is public records research. It is labor-intensive, and experienced independent info pros sometimes take on new employees or interns to provide an additional set of eyes and ears. Note, though, that this usually requires that you are located near the info pro you want to work with; this is hands-on research, and it is hard to train someone remotely.

In general, if you want to get into the independent info profession, your best bet is to read the rest of this book, evaluate your own strengths and weaknesses, take the necessary steps to enhance your skill sets, then—as that sporting goods company admonishes—just do it, and start your own business.

“Can I do this part time?”

Yes and no. Most, if not all, of the work you get will come from word of mouth, and it takes time to generate that initial buzz. The more hours, energy, and creativity you can devote to marketing at the beginning, the faster your network of contacts will grow. The strongest argument for holding down a paid part-time job is that it provides a source of steady income while you are building your business. However, trying to start an independent info pro business while working full time is almost always doomed to failure. This is simply not the kind of business that can be done evenings and weekends.

The disadvantages of working part time while running your business are that you are unavailable to talk to your clients during part of the day, you have less time to generate business, and your focus is split between your two jobs. If you decide to work part time, make a firm commitment to yourself that you will only do so for a specific amount of time—say, six months or a year—during which you will focus on making your business self-sustaining. Note that some kinds of research really cannot be done part time or during off-hours, particularly phone research (you have to be in your office during business hours to make and receive calls), public records research (you have to be available to travel to another county at the drop of a hat, and you are limited to the hours that the public records offices are open), and library staffing (you have to be there when your clients want you in the library). Some beginning independent info pros handle such conflicts by finding part-time jobs that involve evening hours only.

“How much will I earn?”

This depends on several factors—how much time you can devote to marketing your business, who your clients are, how established your business is, how many professional contacts you start out with, and whether this is a full-time or part-time business for you. During your first year, assuming you're working at it full time, you can expect to make anywhere from \$15,000 to \$50,000. Once you have been marketing for a year or two, and your clients have begun recommending you to colleagues, the sky's the limit. Net income (after expenses but before income taxes) can range from \$40,000 to \$200,000, or more. How much *you* make depends on your ability to find clients that you can charge \$150 to \$200 an hour and on your willingness and ability to work at least 40 hours a week. See Chapter 15 for more discussion on setting your rates.

“What was the hardest part of starting a research business?”

Everyone has his or her own pain points and areas of insecurity. That said, there are some challenges that most independent info pros face during their first year. A discussion among AIIP members yielded the following as the most common issues:

- “Consistently communicating to everyone I met that this business is real, viable, and will be around for the duration. It is not a hobby, a part-time diversion or a stepping stone to becoming a corporate employee.” (Cynthia Shamel, Shamel Information Services)

- “Developing a clear vision of what I wanted my business to look like. How do I want my customers to see my business and exactly who are my target customers?” (Michelle Fennimore, Competitive Insights)
- “Getting up the courage to just take the leap of faith and DO it, after planning, and planning, and planning ...” (Liga Greenfield, BioMedPharmIS)
- “The hardest part of starting was like the hardest part of a swim—jumping into the cold water; i.e., deciding to leave steady employment, and believing that I could make a go of it.” (Judy Koren, ResearchWise Associates)
- “I found it hard to charge enough. I got lots of work early on, but I didn’t charge enough for it, so I was very busy but not profitable. One of my early clients took pity on me and told me to double my fees (his company was paying, not him personally).” (Lorna Dean, Bedford Research Consultants)

Independent Info Pro Reality Checklist

Independent info pros usually:

- ◆ Specialize in a particular type of research and client base
- ◆ Need some familiarity with online research
- ◆ Use a variety of resources in order to complete projects
- ◆ Possess entrepreneurial skills as well as research expertise