

# How to create waffle!

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## **Ingredients**

- one Internet search engine of your choice
- two or three keywords
- one hour of your time

## **Method**

- open your Internet access
- activate your World Wide Web browser
- go to the Internet search engine of your choice
- send two key or three key words about the information you are requiring
- wait for the list of websites to be presented (the list is likely to contain many thousands of websites)
- for each of the first ten websites go to the site and collect the information about your keywords
- produce a summary of what you now know about these key words

## **Outcome**

- waffle for use the next time you are stuck for something to say!

Is this a familiar recipe? How many times have you been searching for those key pieces of information and been presented with a bewildering list of websites which appear to have little if any connection with the key words you had entered? It is a recipe for disaster and unfortunately it is all too common. It is a symptom of the Misinformation Society and in some ways we all bear responsibility for we have become information junkies who feed on the byte-size trivia that many of the so-called Internet information engines provide. Indeed many of the traditional information sources have become backwaters left to stagnate through lack of investment.

Does this lack of appropriate information really matter? It might be annoying and it might make us a little less effective and efficient but is there more to this modern way to be?

In a recent article (The Independent Monday Review 19 June 2000), Suelette Dreyfeus discussed the concerns about computer-based information. She reported that leading neuroscientist Professor Susan Greenfield believes that computer based information could result in "loss of imagination, the inability to maintain a long attention span, [and] the tendency to confuse facts with knowledge". Greenfield's concern is that those without life experience will be unable to cope with the bombardment of information because they will not have a cohesive framework in which to place so much information. All these facts do not produce wisdom. This is done by relating facts and then reflecting and inferring. Greenfield argues that the sanitised information society with its information overload may well be changing the way in which we think and may well be reducing our ability to assimilate information, become knowledgeable and undertake judgement.

It is clear that such concerns will have a growing impact on information systems professionals. The information systems professional has, for many years, been charged with providing systems that deliver information for a continuum of users from members of the general public to key individuals within organisations. These professionals have been trained to produce systems which deliver information that is timely, relevant, accessible and accurate. As many reports of system failures demonstrate such information is not always delivered and with the advent of the Internet and intranets misinformation appears to be more and more likely given the typical scenario outlined at the beginning of this article.

We have a professional responsibility to guard against this. Indeed, the draft code of ethics for IMIS (published in a previous edition of the IMIS Journal) states that "Every Fellow and Member of the Institute (including both Professional and Affiliate Membership grades) shall employ his or her intelligence, skills, power and position to ensure that the contribution made by the profession to society is both beneficial and respected." It further states that the IS professional should, "... strive to ensure that professional activities for which I have responsibility, or over which I have influence, will not be a cause of avoidable harm to any section of the wider community, present or future, ..." and "...use my knowledge, understanding and position to oppose false claims made by others regarding the capabilities, potential or safety of any aspect of Information Systems ...".

It is therefore clear that all information systems professionals must consider carefully the provision of so-called information, ensuring that it not only satisfies the immediate need but that also the manner in which this is achieved is not to the long term detriment of those using such systems. Perhaps it is time that information systems professionals join with the information science professionals, the traditional custodians of information

sources, to produce a rich and valuable information resource that will educate and inspire all, helping them to develop as individuals.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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