

What's in it for maintenance professionals? Fifteen uses of the Internet

By Joel Levitt

There are several ways the Internet is being used by the maintenance profession. Since the capabilities are on-line, they are available around the clock, 365 days a year. Usually the servers (computers where the information is located that are connected directly to the net) are available except when they are being backed-up or serviced.

1. The biggest use of the Internet is carrying messages or E-mail. In one study 80% of the business uses of the Internet was for E-mail.

2. Find vendors of everything from valves to engineering services. Companies can make their latest catalogs available as soon as they are complete. It is much less expensive to provide the catalog on-line rather than printing them. It also saves your shelf space and trees too! Because of the increasing cost of paper expect to see a push for on-line catalogs. Since storage on the computers is inexpensive, a huge volume of information can be made available such as complete technical specifications, photographs, video clips, audio descriptions, or drawings. All of it is just a click away. This is the second dominant use for the Internet after E-mail. The driving force is advertising budgets. An entire Web site for a year is comparable in cost to a single full-page ad in a leading maintenance magazine.

3. Technical bulletins: The latest technical problem and fixes can be available minutes after the vendor's engineers decide to put it on-line. No longer is there a weeks to months lead-time to publish and mail the bulletins. Also, having the latest information is a click away. The software vendors are light years ahead of everyone else in this area and can give a higher level of support at a lower cost through this method (see below on software bug fix, software distribution).

4. Drawings, field modifications, and manuals: The same way you are updated by technical bulletins you can view manuals and download drawings (down-load means to copy a file from the computer, called a server, where it is located to your computer). The file can be a manual, a drawing, just about anything). Wouldn't that be great at 3 am when you can't find the wiring diagram? Also, field modifications can be fed back to the OEM engineering departments if that is appropriate.

5. Parts information, parts purchasing, reducing the cost of acquisition: Some sites allow you to look-up part numbers from exploded drawings. You can put your mouse cursor on the part and



drag the number to an order form. Add your P.O.# and ship-to address and you have placed an order.

6. Commerce: This is an expansion of the idea above. You can currently shop for many MRO items from storefronts on the Internet. Major industrial distributors such as Grainger and McMaster Carr have a large presence on the Web. These storefronts currently cover all types of consumer goods and a few offer tools, maintenance supplies, uniforms and other items. Encryption (fancy way to scramble up transmissions) allows high security for credit card numbers and bank information.

7. FAQ (frequently asked questions): In every field and on every piece of equipment there are FAQ's. These are what most of the time of the telephone response department is spent on. The FAQ file can be read by novices or new customers. FAQ's are on line and available 24 hrs a day, when you, the new user, have a question.

8. Technical help: Technical help is one of the greatest areas of the Internet. You can ask questions of the vendor's technical departments and get answers back to solve your problems. Technical departments develop a menu of canned E-mails that solve these common problems for immediate response. The technician can then spend time on the more uncommon or complicated problems.

9. Locating used equipment and parts: In addition to the largest marketplace in the world (Ebay.com) there are currently classified ad sections where companies and individuals can purchase, sell and trade equipment. A local manufacturer buys and sells punch presses completely on the net.

10. Software changes: Almost all-major vendors of software allow you access to the latest versions of their software. You visit their site and can initiate a download of the latest version. Also software that you want to sample is available as a download also.

11. Directories of installers, vendors: When you are looking for vendors or installers you can ask members of a user group of interest make an electronic query from a home page on the Web or use E-mail.

12. Access to library: Many university libraries and information databases are available on-line. The library of Congress is putting their enormous library on-line. A group is making available the complete texts of great books available via downloading.

13. User groups: Do you own a CMMS and want to talk to others with the same system. Many user groups are going on-line as Newsgroups (see Newsgroups). Here you can read other's comments about the software, ask questions of the whole group, get help and gripe to your hearts content.

14. Blogs: Stands for WeB Logs. People from all walks of life write their opinions and take comments from their audiences to discuss the issues important to them. There are several maintenance blogs.

15. Killing time: If you have an hour or more to spare, the Internet is more fun then TV and can be a lot less predictable. In some homes web surfing has almost replaced channel surfing.

Joel Levitt, Director International Projects JLEVITT@LCE.COM
Life Cycle Engineering | 4360 Corporate Road Office | Charleston, SC 29405
843.744.7110
Mobile +1-267-254-0061
www.LCE.com