Everything is Going Digital – Including Reference Books

Diana Bittern, director of product management at Knovel (www.knovel.com)

A recent story in ReadWriteWeb [1], cited that 1 out 5 textbooks will be digital by 2014. Moreover, everything from newspapers to trade magazines and books are slowly but surely making the move from print to digital format. Much of this effort is being led not only by the influx of tablets and e-readers, but also consumer desire for three key things: personalization, ease of use and ability to collaborate. Simply put, static print has seen its hay-day and the general population is hungry for ways to find and absorb information faster, and on-the-go.

ECN editor-in-chief, Alix Paultre recently reviewed [2] a reference book and highlighted the vast content included in this book. In a similar vein, I'd like to call attention to the ways engineers are leading the digital movement described above. For over a decade, engineering professionals and students have been turning to digital content in an effort to increase productivity. Throughout their careers, engineers frequently create a "three-ring binder" of go-to resources, pulling content from engineers' handbooks, materials property databases, standards, online searches and libraries of math and best practices. Today, there is a distinct need for engineers to continue to turn to these resources, but in a way that is not only personalized, but easily accessible as part of their work flow. Some of the key benefits of digital content include the following:

- Search Optimization – **enabling engineers not only to find relevant data, but also to analyze, document and incorporate it into their everyday work**
- Interactive Tools – ensuring engineers have the data analysis tools to find information hidden in complex graphs, equations and tables quickly, and to analyze and manipulate data as easily as sorting a spreadsheet

So why are engineers leading the digital movement? *Now*, more than ever, organizations are under pressure to rapidly introduce new products at lower costs. Facing aggressive timelines and managing more projects than ever before, engineers need convenient access to reliable information that enables them to quickly build or refresh expertise on a diverse range of subjects. Already, engineers spend approximately one quarter of their working day dealing with external information such as handbooks, materials property databases, libraries of math and best practices – and this number is trending upward. It all comes down to the same design challenges: to beat the competition, reduce time to market, create high quality, lower cost products, and make engineers more productive. Access to interactive digital content is a key part of helping engineers to meet these product design challenges.

The next step in this digital movement is focused on personalization. The ability to digitally accumulate knowledge anywhere you have a Web connection is key for the high pressure environment many, if not all, engineers work in. Companies like Knovel [3] allow users to organize and manage saved content of all types with additional features that include:

- **My Bookshelf**
  – engineers can save frequently used titles and organize them into personalized folders
- **My Saved Content**
  – engineers can save and organize chapters and interactive content into their folders
- **My Saved Searches**
  – engineers can save search queries and re-execute them with one click

While I agree with Paultre's recent review of "Core Engineering Concepts for Students and Professionals", I believe that in today's world, the first place engineers go to solve problems is online. The ability to provide engineers with a tight integration of three key elements – validated content, optimized search, and data analysis tools – enables engineers not only to find relevant data fast, but also to analyze, document and incorporate it into their everyday work. What other changes are you seeing in engineer's tool box as we move to accomplish more, faster?

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