WHAT DO PRODUCT DEVELOPERS READ?

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Upon writing a magazine article on techniques for improving the performance of product development teams, coauthor Emily Blanck and I considered where to publish our piece. "Where do product developers read about such tools?" we wondered. We had some guesses but no facts, so we launched a survey. I would like to share the survey with you, as the results are helpful and, in cases, surprising.

APPROACH

We maintain e-mail lists of clients and others with whom we regularly communicate on product development issues. After eliminating those on the list who do not develop products directly (consultants, academics, media people, and government officials), we sent an e-mail to each of over 1000 individuals, asking three questions:

- What magazines or journals do you read that address such issues?
- Assuming that your management makes decisions on (development) teams or improving their performance, what do they read?
- Where would you look for authoritative information on this topic?

We received 264 responses. Some responses didn't help us identify target magazines (don't read magazines on this topic, don't read specific periodicals, periodicals read were quite specialized). This left us with over 78 periodicals listed by 180 individuals.

RESULTS

Here is our top-ten list with the number of responses for each one:

Harvard Business Review 52
Journal of Product Innovation Management 27
Machine Design 24
Design News 22
Wall Street Journal 19
Project Management Journal 17
Fast Company 16
Business Week 14
Mechanical Engineering 14
Research-Technology Management...13

Besides *Business Week,* traditional business magazines mentioned were *Fortune* (14th, 10 responses) and *Forbes* (17th, 8). Others in the "new" business magazine category in addition to *Fast Company* were *Wired* (43rd, 3), *Business 2.0* (45th, 2), and *Red Herring* (57th, 2). Two industry-specific magazines were prominent: *Automotive Industries* (21st, 6) and *Medical Device & Diagnostic Industry* (22nd, 6). Although our mailing was international, non-US responses were few; a notable exception was *Business Review Weekly* (37th, 3) from Australia.

OBSERVATIONS

Print media are a dying breed. Many respondents related that they had no time for reading anymore. One woman, responsible for the product development process at a respected, major electronics firm, admitted, "I spend virtually no time doing reading-based research (shameful but true)." A vice president of engineering lamented, "Frankly, I have been so busy with everything that I haven't had time to read technical journals for about 5 years." For a vice president in the semiconductor industry, magazines were simply too slow: the subscriptions couldn't keep up with him as his job kept moving!

Often respondents said that if they wanted solutions for team performance issues they would turn to the Web or other online services before looking in a magazine or journal. Several advised us to just skip the publishing process and put our article up on the Web immediately, often adding that we should be sure to "register" it with the search engines. Part of *Fast Company's* high ranking is perhaps that this isn't just a magazine but also a Website tightly integrated into its fundamental mission.

Mechanical development has better magazine resources available than electronics or software. Mechanical developers have three magazines available in our top ten—*Machine Design, Design News,* and *Mechanical Engineering*—and all carry management articles. The respective electronics/software magazines—*Electronic Design* (not mentioned), *Spectrum* (24th, 6) and *EDN* (25th, 5)—focus on technical issues to the exclusion of management ones. Although *Design News* does have some electronics content, EEs do not appear to receive the exposure to management issues that MEs do.

Librarians aren't viewed as a resource. Only two people mentioned a librarian as a resource: they went to their librarians to get the answers to our questions. Over many years, I have found librarians—corporate, public, university, or government—invariably eager to help me find literature to suit my needs. Although online resources are often intended to be do-it-yourself, there are so many available today that a professional can often focus the search much faster. If you are blessed with a librarian, take advantage of this resource.