

Embargo: 00.00 am, 5 September 2009

UK small businesses' access to academic and professional information is good – but could be better

Staff in high-tech small businesses (small and medium-sized enterprises, or SMEs) in the UK - with 250 employees or fewer - place a high value on, and make considerable use of, research articles and other academic and professional information. Their access to such information is good, and improving, although it could be even better, according to a new study from the Publishing Research Consortium.

The main findings for small businesses, from a broader survey of over 1000 completed responses covering several other sectors, were as follows:

- Across the board, 28% of respondents in small businesses said that their journal access was 'good' or 'excellent', 56% that it varied, and 17% that it was 'poor' or 'very poor'.
- However, of those who considered information to be an important success factor for their organisation, 71% found access to research articles 'easy' or 'very easy', while 29% felt it was 'fairly difficult' or 'very difficult'.
- 60% felt that access was easier than five years ago.
- Despite this, more than half had experienced some recent difficulty in obtaining one or more articles, representing 10-20% of articles read annually.
- Although they use a wide range of access channels, they find current pay-per-view (PPV) arrangements costly and difficult, and 'walk-in' access at a local university inconvenient.

What can publishers do to improve access for these users? A number of suggestions are made:

- Pay-per-view access could be made simpler, with more appropriate payment mechanisms for companies rather than individuals, and – above all – cheaper.
- Licences for Higher Education Institutions could be extended to provide online, rather than just walk-in, access (with appropriate safeguards) for local businesses.
- A comprehensive, centrally administered national licence could be negotiated.

Bob Campbell, Chair of the Publishing Research Consortium steering group, commented:

The so-called 'access gap' for small businesses has often been cited as a problem in the current scholarly communication system, without much idea of its extent. This study is an important first step in improving our understanding of how staff in small businesses use journals and what can be done to achieve even greater access.

Notes for editors

The full study, 'Access by small and medium-sized UK enterprises to professional and academic information', carried out by Mark Ware Consulting Ltd for the Publishing Research Consortium, is available (together with a detailed Companion Report containing full statistical analyses and results for all sectors, including universities and colleges, hospitals and medical schools, research institutes and large companies) at <http://www.publishingresearch.net/SMEaccess.htm>

The Publishing Research Consortium (<http://www.publishingresearch.net>) is a group of associations and publishers, which supports global research into scholarly communication in order to enable evidence-based discussion. The PRC's objective is to support work that is scientific and pro-scholarship, in order to promote an understanding of the role of publishing and its impact on research and teaching.