# Information requirements of women entrepreneurs in Pune City

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**Abstract:**

*Entrepreneurs in different situations need information inputs for planning, implementing, monitoring or reviewing schemes, projects and programs. The purpose for which information is required varies. There may be an immediate need for information to understand the situation one is in, to convince and persuade others, and to use the opportunities available; or individuals may gather information to prevent a problem situation in future, or help one to make the most of it.*

*A majority of the information studies have been done in different fields as there seems to be a consensus that the information needs of an employment group of a local population or a subject group tend to be similar, while that of different groups may be different. This framework assumes that by studying the groups to which the users belong, researchers can determine the needs and the information seeking patterns of the individual members of the group; and that systems can be designed to serve the group members.*

*This paper is based on a study conducted on first generation women entrepreneurs in the city of Pune, India. Entrepreneurs were asked about their entry into becoming 'entrepreneurs', and about the types of information that they had looked for and mainly how they had sought information. Entrepreneurs were asked to tell their "stories" of how they started, why they started and how they looked for information for the work that they were planning. This paper further looks into what is available readily, how a site could be created for women running small and micro businesses, and how this information could further empower them.*

**Keywords:** *women entrepreneurs, information seeking, women's empowerment, information requirements*

**Introduction**

In the knowledge economy, where the touchstone of competitiveness is the capacity for innovation, the fostering of an entrepreneurial culture is important. The term "entrepreneur" was first introduced by Richard Cantillon - a French banker - in the mid 18th century, as "the agent who buys means of production at certain prices in order to combine them into a new product" (Schumpeter, 1951). An entrepreneur, according to Cantillon, was a kind of person who was engaged in production activities and made certain payments to the owners of production factories in expectation of uncertain receipts and was mainly an uncertainty bearer (Aitken, 1965).

By its very definition, an entrepreneur is an 'uncertainty bearer' and needs to take a variety of decisions which make or break the business. Entrepreneurs in different situations need information inputs in planning, implementing, monitoring or reviewing schemes, projects and programs. The purpose for which information is required varies. There may be an immediate need for information to understand the situation one is in, to convince and persuade others, and to use the opportunities available. Without being conscious of the need, individuals in a situation may gather information which would either prevent a problem situation in future, or help one to make the most of it.

This paper is based on a study conducted on first generation women entrepreneurs in the city of Pune. Pune is a city located in the western part of India, next to the financial capital Mumbai (Bombay) in the state of Maharashtra. The city is evolving at a fast rate and is now counted to be a very important commercial and IT hub, with major IT firms having their offices in Pune.

This study looked at first generation women entrepreneurs, and how they viewed information and how they got information. The trend was seen that those who are more information savvy tended to be more successful in their venture. A survey of first generation small entrepreneurs (excluding doctors, lawyers and chartered accountants) was conducted, and some of them were selected for personal interviews. The women were asked about their entry into becoming 'entrepreneurs' and about the types of information that they had looked for, and mainly how they had sought information. The methodology used here was by collection of narratives. Entrepreneurs were asked to tell their "stories" of how they started, why they started, and how they looked for information for the work that they were planning.

This paper looks at the results of the survey, and design of a site to help these women entrepreneurs. Statistical data is not given here. But some portions of the narratives are reproduced.

**Why we became entrepreneurs?**

The stories of the women entrepreneurs started with why they became entrepreneurs. They gave five main reasons for starting on their own:

**1. Independence, Creativity & Recognition:** Many of the respondents said that they had started on their own because they wanted to be independent; they wanted the freedom to work as they pleased and not have any rigid conditions foisted on them.

> "I decided again to start something because I was not in favour of working for someone; I would feel that all the credit for my designs was taken away by my employer. When I was working as a junior engineer, our seniors would go for a meeting to present our work and take all the credit. I thought I deserved to get all the credit and disappointments if any, in to my pockets".

> "frankly speaking I couldn't have worked under anyone else. Independently I can do whatever I want then I can do it freely without any...someone on my head. Working for somebody else became boring and there is not much fun in it".

*2.* **Tradition:** Some of the respondents said that they had grown up in business families and so they had to start on their own, they could not think of working regular hours in an office.

> "All my life, I have seen my family members in business only. So it was only fit that I should also start something of my own. I could not imagine going to work in an office from 9 to 5".

**3. Family Responsibilities**: A few of the women cited that they had time on their hands now that their children had grown up, while other women had given up jobs and started on their own as they had small children at home. Parenthood seems to have had a great influence on a woman's decision to start her own business (Birley, 1989: Affholder and Box, 2004). A small business owner has more freedom to plan one's work schedule and to combine work with family life, which is often an important consideration for females (Hokkanen and Autio 1998).

> *"I had a small child and we had no relatives in Pune. I tried leaving my child in a crèche but after some time I did not want to. I planned cutting expenditure for nearly a year before I gave up my job. I had to be mentally prepared to live with less. After all, both of us worked for a certain life style. Now the work I get is enough and I make almost as much money as I used to when I was working, as I do not have to pay for commuting and for the crèche."*

**4. Accidental Entry:** Some respondents had an accidental or circumstantial entry. In some cases, the respondents had started the business with a friend, sibling or spouse and later carried on completely on their own.

> *"I was only a housewife - but I had worked for a garments shop dealing in woollen garments. But because of it being a seasonal business I stopped going there. I read in the newspaper about a plastic institute who had advertised for a fifteen day course in fibre-glass which I completed. After I finished the course, I started manufacturing fibre-glass basins for parlours."*

> *"When I began (making the yogurt) from home, the neighbours complained that something was being produced here. At that time it was on a very small scale, something like 20 to 30 litres, so we were not aware of the business part of it. The food inspector came home and he advised me to get a license for this. I acquired one and started off".*

**5. Conflict in the Workplace**: Some entrepreneurs were working in offices or companies, but due to conflict or differences at the workplace or due to inconvenient transfers, they left their jobs and started on their own.

> *"I had my spouse and three small children besides other family here and I did not want to move out of Pune, so I quit and started on my own. At that time many offices were buying computers and I offered to maintain them."*

**Looking for information**

The issue of *'information'* was problematic in that people could not understand information requirement or information seeking, and several women replied by saying, "*I knew what was required",* or "*I did not need any information*". It was a routine activity that all of them did. One entrepreneur talked about how she had registered her firm, and how she had got loans sanctioned from various banks in response to direct questions about these; but could not answer how she knew these things. *"Everyone knows these things"* was what she replied. Later narrating about her early days, she described how her husband and father-in-law had been running their own firm for years, and how they had told her what the necessary formalities were, how to go about fulfilling them. So she "knew" what to do.

> *"This is not a problem at all, there is always somebody who tells you what to do. My husband told me about the bank, the bank manager told me about special schemes for women and for small entrepreneurs. People who were running a shop next door to my shop told me what I had to do for the society, about the health inspectors and the permits required".*

Another women entrepreneur who was running a travel and tourism firm also claimed not to need any information. However, while narrating her story she talked about how she had consulted the 'yellow pages', the telephone directories of various cities and road maps to find out how to get to a place before they actually visited any place. But she did not think 'yellow pages', the telephone directories of various cities and road maps constituted information sources, or that consulting them was an information seeking activity.

As the women entrepreneurs were first generation entrepreneurs, most of them had worked in an established organization before starting on their own. A starting point for many respondents was their previous workplace, mentors were often ex-employers and very often, their first clients were their previous employers. Apart from the experience and knowledge gained, the links with the organisation continued creating a 'structural embeddedness' which was a significant factor providing the entrepreneurs with support.

> *"We were very secure in the sense that we knew that, if this did not work out, (our company) would take us back. The company also offered us a consultancy and we would go there once a week to do work there. In that sense they were our first clients, but very soon others came".*

**What information did they want?**

The survey revealed that, when starting out, most entrepreneurs wanted information on:
- Consumer needs
- Marketing
- Finance and loans
- Legal information
- Technical information

Information about business practices and about writing project proposals came next. Least information was required on packaging and warehousing. A few respondents wanted information on real estate, hiring practices, packaging and storage and warehousing.

Women entrepreneurs who had been in their own business over a longer period of time seemed to need a little more information than those who had been in business for a lesser time. This could be because of the 'recognition' factor. Most people cannot recognize that they need information, or even the fact that they have looked for information, unless they have specifically been told that, this is information that you are using. This generally comes from more education or more experience.

**What were their sources of information?**

The major sources of information were 'personal contacts' followed by 'professional consultants'. Personal contacts were the major source of information - they could be from friends, relatives, former employers and sometimes even competitors. Written documentation tends to be less valued than personal contact, because personal contact serves the function of increasing human contact within the organization as well as possessing a 'richness' that written materials do not have. Most women entrepreneurs seem to prefer 'information rich' informal sources who can be 'asked' to explain anything that was not clear, or if there was any doubt. This preference was also seen in other studies.

Johnson and Kuehn (1987) found that entrepreneurs tend to rely heavily on verbal channels of communication to meet their information needs. Informal and personal sources have numerous advantages; they can be questioned and asked to explain themselves, and they are familiar with the

entrepreneurs and their background. Existing network research shows that family, friends, and business associates were seen as providing valuable information about starting a business, and which type of business to found (Dubini & Aldrich, 1991). Kassim (2010) found that apart from personal contacts, other sources of information included courses, business exhibitions, the Internet/e-mail, business premises and government agencies. Respondents claimed that most of their business information was obtained by talking and sharing experiences with other entrepreneurs, discussing with friends/relatives, reading newspapers and magazines, and asking clients. This study has implications for meeting entrepreneurs' business information needs in Malaysia (Kassim 2010).

Because of the numerous roles that they have to play in their organization, most entrepreneurs tend to have a wide network of contacts and utilize them. In many cases family members were also qualified professionals. Amongst the professional consultants, the most referred to were chartered accountants and lawyers. Personal networks have been found to play an important role in business start-up and success, and family and friends were important elements in entrepreneurs' networks.

Only in the cases of hiring technical and financial information did respondents use institutions and libraries as sources of information. In case of financial information, many entrepreneurs got the information from banks. Professional consultants were the preferred source for getting information for legal matters and, to a large extent, for financial and loan matters.

> *"I don't remember any time when in spite of having all the sources I haven't got the required information. I always find the means and ways to get it. Once I had a problem in exports, regarding an export inspection agency. So I went to each and every office in Pune and sent every office a letter, and I got the information I required. So one has to try and even after that, if you don't get the information, then its O.K. At least you don't feel guilty that you never tried. Besides the net, for information I have tried NCL, BCL - of which I am a member- and MCCIA - from where I collect information regarding trade and export. We take information from the agricultural directorate; then we need information from our customers and dealers for market surveys. People have been a more useful source than print media. Gathering information has taken 70% of my time and 30% I must have allotted to other things. Without information, production is not possible".*

> **"***The basic requirements of what one needs to do can be found out from MCCIA in Pune, who were a big help, and also from my CA, and there are also agents who do this job for you. They tell you all the forms to be filled, how the business projections are to be made, how to get loans. This was a big help for getting legal information. No other licenses were required. The labour was provided by a contractor whose address was given to me by a friend. I read the minimum wages act from books and also went to the labour office to find out about it".*

> *"I already knew from the past that there were contractors and information brokers, who have lists ready of all the equipment, specifications, brands available, prices and from where to purchase them. So I went to one person and got this information".*

Regarding **technical information** one woman entrepreneur said:

> *"I think this kind of information only professionals can give; there is no formal set up kind of thing. The information is too scattered and it is with people and professionals. Fortunately over the years the network has expanded so much that almost in every corner we have got a guide or friend or whom we can contact and get information".*

About **legal and financial information** another entrepreneur said:

> "The *moment I purchased my shop, the shopkeeper next door told me that I would have to get myself registered under the shop-act and even told me how to go about it.*

> *Since my husband is also a businessman, he also advised me. Representatives of the bank told me about some loan schemes."*

Although information needs changed with growth of the enterprise, none of the respondents were able to express and articulate this change. It must be stated that there were also those entrepreneurs who did not recognize either information or their use of information. As one woman entrepreneur remarked:

> *"I didn't need any legal information because I was doing everything legally. Finance… I took initially from bank. I did not take any information about technical things, I had all that knowledge. We all do it here".*

Institutional sources in Pune city that were most frequently referred to were Mahratta Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture (MCCIA), Maharashtra Industrial and Technical consultants (MITCON), Maharashtra Council for Entrepreneur Development (MCED), Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI), The Educational Multimedia Research Centre (EMRC), Women Entrepreneurs and Managers Association (WEMA), and British Council Library (BCL). Nearly 50% of the women entrepreneurs said they had used documents of one type or another. This figure is perhaps lower than it actually is because some respondents did not think of brochures or directories as documentary sources of information. Entrepreneurs got access to the documents from institutions, friends or others. Many specifically mentioned that they had purchased them from bookshops. The Internet was more frequently used by the younger entrepreneurs.

Women entrepreneurs strongly felt the need for organized information at one place which would help beginners to set up a business and help others to expand their business.

**WeInfoPune**

Based on the results of the interviews, we decided to build a open access site "WeInfoPune": https://sites.google.com/site/weinfopune/ to help upcoming entrepreneurs in the city. As librarians working in universities, students and individuals approach us for information related to aspects of entrepreneurship. While a lot of material is available at global and national levels, we found that many entrepreneurs wanted to know what was available locally and hence the efforts to put together information available in Pune city (trying to be glocal!!). At the initial stage, we decided to use Google open platform of "Google Sites".  At present we have planned to provide information on finance and loans, legal aspects, latest news in the field, and information sources.  An Ask and Share facility for interactive question answer, and online information requisition forms are being planned. At the time of writing this paper, the site is at infant stage and will grow with more interactions among information providers, entrepreneurs and library and information science professionals. Initially the tools used in design of the WeInfoPune are:

**Table 1: Tools and purpose**

| Tools | Purpose |
|---|---|
| Google Sites | Portal development |
| Google Gadgets | Links to various databases and portals |
| Google Scholar | Citations of research papers |
| Google News | Links to world wide news related to Bioinformatics and India |
| Google Docs / form | Online information request form |
| RSS feeds | Gather the data from databases and news servers |

**Main page**

The Main Page has three primary components: the main body, current information boxes and the horizontal navigation pane. The main body succinctly explains the purpose of the portal and provides appropriate contact information. Current information boxes display an RSS feed of Google News, which displays daily news on keywords "micro small and medium enterprises India". Events conducted by MCCIA are integrated with the help of iFrame Google Gadget. Figure 1 shows the main page of the portal with Google News display.
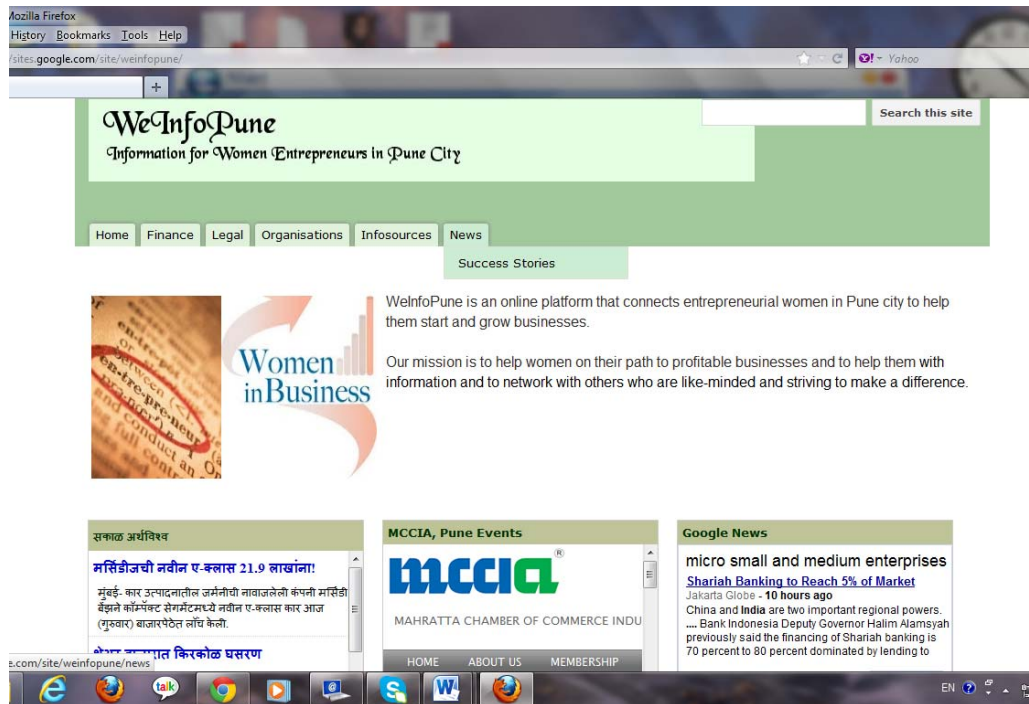


**Figure 1:  Main page of WeInfoPune**

**Other pages**

Other pages are mainly concerned with the most important information required by the women entrepreneurs. Hence information and links to financial sources, institutional sources, legal aspects (mainly how to register, get licenses, etc.) and sources of information.  Our idea is to organize this information so as to make it more user friendly for all categories of entrepreneurs. Usability testing of the site will be carried out in the near future.

**Challenges for Librarians**

The experiences during the development of WeInfoPune suggest that librarians can play a role as a intermediary between the women entrepreneurs and the information that they need. They can focus their work and skills to organize information for specific user communities in order to widen their information gathering skills.

Special effort can be made to understand the information requirements at the grass root level. Referring to books and other reference materials, talking to subject experts and attending training programs will help in this. By working with the entrepreneurs, information professionals get to understand the nitty-gritty of their information requirements.

They need to face the challenges of monitoring ever increasing numbers and types of information containers and tools to extract information out of it (Nagarkar & Parekh, 2010). Librarians need to refresh and update their domain knowledge and improve their computational skills. Apart from traditional course work, library schools should design special training programs to serve special users and domain experts, and to learn the documentation practices in science and technology. Sathe (2007) mentions that human intelligence remains critical for assessing information and recognizing patterns and connections in information that lead to knowledge. Librarians can contribute to this intelligence and can help ensure that the entrepreneurs continue to be a vital force for strengthening the economy.

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