



‘Beeing’ an Info Pro

Apparently in need of a life—or at least a hobby—last winter, I enrolled in an 8-week course on beekeeping taught by the local association of beekeepers. My 30,000 bees arrived from California in April, and since then, I have immersed myself in bee biology and culture. To my delight, I have found that beekeepers (beeks) are a lot like info pros. We both get completely obsessed with what interests us, we are always learning new theories and approaches, and we enjoy supporting each other and sharing our expertise.

There are also a surprising number of similarities between the bees themselves and info pros, and since bees have been around for 100 million years, perhaps we could learn a few things from them.

Bees can travel 3 miles from their hive in search of nectar and pollen, and they shift their focus during the course of the spring and summer as different plants bloom. Likewise, we info pros have to remember to extend our search beyond the closest or easiest sources. What worked last year might not be the best resource today.

There are 20,000 species of bees; only seven produce honey. There are lots of people who call themselves “researchers,” but not all of them create a product that is valuable to others. We info pros need to highlight what sets us apart from anyone with curiosity and a web browser.

If necessary, a worker bee will take on a new role within the hive—from foraging for nectar to caring for newborn bees, for example. When she does, her brain rewires itself and relearns skills lost during the aging process. While our brains don’t show this same remarkable level of plasticity, we too need to keep learning skills to adjust to new roles and responsibilities.

The hexagonal design of a honeycomb is the most efficient structural design possible; it uses the least possible amount of wax and provides the most stability and support. Info pros are skilled at packaging our results in a way that makes it easy for our clients to use. Our work products are consistent, well-organized, easy to use, and appropriate for the need.

Honey is nectar from which most moisture content has been reduced from 70% to less than 20%. Info pros gather large quantities of information, not all of which will be useful for the client. One of our responsibilities is to distill the information down, removing that which does not answer the client’s question, and retaining the best, most focused material.

Honey never spoils, due to its low moisture content and the enzymes that bees add to the nectar when they deposit it into a comb cell. (But don’t feed honey to infants under a year old, due to the risk of infant botulism.) Likewise, information that has been properly prepared and distilled is always seen as valuable by our clients. When we include an executive summary or cover memo that highlights what we found and what our research parameters were, the deliverable retains its usefulness over time.

Bees’ most important contribution isn’t honey—it’s pollination. The vast majority of food crops rely on pollination, primarily by bees; the reason plants produce nectar is to attract pollinators. Likewise, we info pros need to look at the reason behind our clients’ requests. If we understand what they are trying to accomplish, we might take a different approach or deliver the results in a more useful format.

Unlike yellowjackets—with which bees are often confused and which are hooligans that sting and bite out of sheer cussedness—honeybees only sting when they think their hive is being threatened, and they die after stinging. On a bad day, we info pros are tempted to attack when a client brings in a last-minute, ill-conceived, unorganized, rush job that must take priority over everything else. While responding badly usually isn’t fatal for humans, we should limit our fights to when the library is being directly threatened.

Bee stings can be helpful—bee venom may help relieve arthritis symptoms. Likewise, sometimes we have to push back with our clients. “No, you don’t really want a D&B report; what you need is just a list of the company’s executives, right?” These little stings may serve to help avoid future pain and inflexibility on the part of our clients.

There are, of course, limits to how far to take the comparison of bees to info pros. The male bees—drones—do no work, eat the hive’s food, and are ruthlessly ejected from the hive by the worker bees in the fall. A drone’s only role is to mate with a queen bee, after which, if successful, it dies. Fortunately, work roles are not quite so specialized in the info pro world.

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