

Searching for Statistics Online

Finding accurate statistics online can be a nerve-wracking and frustrating process. It should be easy—shouldn't it?—to determine the change in the percentage of Americans employed by maritime industries over the past two centuries? As is often the case, much depends on what question is asked, how it is asked, and how one interprets the results found.

Most statistical data is collected and published by governments, which makes sense because the work is time-consuming and often seems to be of little immediate or economic value. Over time, however, this value grows—and most historians can think of data they would wish someone had accurately collected and published through the ages.

In the United States, each federal agency independently collects data and publishes it online. Resources like FedStats (<http://www.fedstats.gov>) provide some insight into what can be found and where. The *CIA World Factbook* (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>) has provided public information about nations since 1975. For the past 135 years, the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/>) has brought together many of the most important statistics in a very useful guide. Alas, to save mere pennies, in late 2011 the federal government suspended publication of the *Statistical Abstract*.

To return to the example question about maritime industries employment, a quick search in Google provides some useful information: the top link I found took me to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics's *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/>), which listed 2008 employment numbers for "water transportation occupations." Looking down the page, however, I discovered that this number does not include "fishers and fishing vessel operators," who add almost half again as many workers.

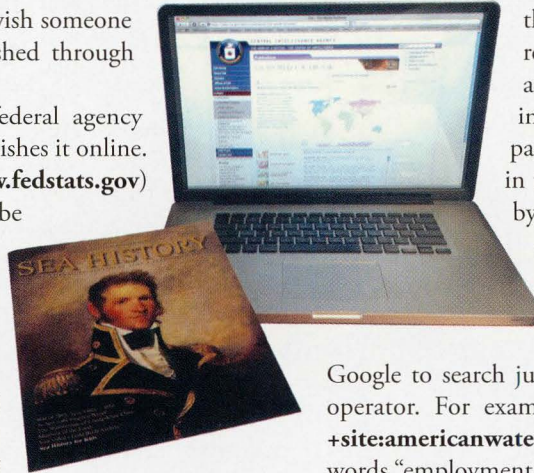
Finding data not collected by government agencies can prove to be a more difficult task. Often, the next best approach is to ask, "Who would be interested enough in this information

to research and generate this data?" Trade organizations can be useful places to turn. After you identify the largest relevant trade organizations, you can check their websites to search for statistics. It's a slightly roundabout approach but can provide good results. Also, it's important to consider who would be willing to share or give away such data for free—a trade organization that wants to promote its industry by emphasizing the number of individuals employed by it is much more likely to offer this information for free online versus a consulting or marketing firm that primarily works for industry insiders. Remember, too, that an organization's goals may impact its results: perhaps the maritime industry trade association counts the cumulative number of individuals employed by the industry over the past year, rather than the number of positions in the industry—some of which might be filled by a dozen different individuals over the course of a single year.

If you feel stymied by the website layout of an appropriate trade organization, you can bypass their web design by using Google to search just within that site by using the "+site:___" operator. For example, a search for "**employment statistics +site:americanwaterways.com**" will return any mention of the words "employment," "statistics," or similar terms ("labor," "jobs," "figures," etc.) only from the pages on the **americanwaterways.com** website.

There are many other places to turn, as well. Most academic and large public libraries have access to collections of expensive databases and directories that will guide you to many more statistical sources, and, for particularly challenging searches, they are often worth using for both their vast resources and the expert help available from their professional librarians. When you are at the library, be sure to look at the *American Statistics Index*, a guide to all of the statistical publications produced by the US government; *Statistical Reference Index*, which helps locate non-governmental statistical data; and *Index to International Statistics* for non-US statistics.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at peter@shipindex.org. See <http://shipindex.org> for a free compilation of over 140,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals. ⚓



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