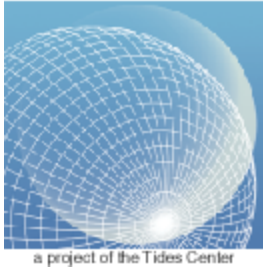


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*Research Briefing*

## **Use of the Internet at Major Life Moments**

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## Use of the Internet at Major Life Moments

Information on the Web is important to significant numbers of Americans when they are making important choices related to education and job training, investments and big-ticket purchases, and health care for themselves or for loved ones. Online material is also important to a relatively large number of people who are looking for new jobs and new places to live.

In a survey of 1,415 Internet users in January 2002, we asked whether they had gone through any of 15 major events or decisions in the past two years. If they had, we asked whether their use of the Internet played any kind of role in the events they dealt with or in the decisions they made. Their responses showed that:

- 14 million American Internet users who **got more education or training for their career** in the past two years say their use of the Internet was crucial or important in upgrading their skills.
- 14 million Americans who **purchased cars** in the past two years say their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in their decision.
- 11 million Americans who **helped a loved one deal with an illness** in the past two years say their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in their aid to another person. More than 4 million Americans say the Internet helped them cope with their own struggle with a major illness in the past two years.
- 11 million Americans who **chose a school or college for themselves or a child** in the past two years say their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in that decision.
- 9 million Americans who **made a major financial or investment decision** in the past two years say their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in that decision.
- 8 million Americans who **changed jobs** in the past two years say their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in helping them through that transition. And 8 million Americans who **found new places to live** say the Internet played a crucial or important role in the search.

The Internet played a lesser role in romantic relationships. Modest proportions of our respondents reported that the Internet was a vital player when they started relationships (2 million people), ended relationships (2 million people), or got married (1 million people). No one we spoke to told us that the Internet played an important role when they were getting a divorce.

The survey showed that notable numbers of Americans turn to the Internet as a basic reference tool to gather information and, in some cases, to compare alternative courses of action. The pattern of responses to our questions suggests that the Internet is relatively more important in episodes where the abundance of information online is especially helpful, where the activity is focused on learning new material on a complex subject, and where the ability to compare information is especially significant. At the same time, the

role of the Internet is less significant in intimate situations, perhaps because the need for accurate information is often secondary to the emotions of the moment.

Here is a list of the activities we asked about. In the survey, all respondents were asked whether they had gone through any of these major moments in the past two years. The Internet users who said they had were then asked whether the Internet played any role when they went through that moment or made that decision. The table below ranks Internet users in each category who say the Internet played a crucial or important role in their decision or their experience:

### The Internet's impact is greatest on school searches

*Percent who say the Internet played a crucial/important role*

1. Of the Internet users who chose a school or college for themselves or their children ...	36%
2. Of the Internet users who started a new hobby ...	33%
3. Of the Internet users who got additional education or training for their career ...	29%
4. Of the Internet users who bought a car ...	27%
5. Of the Internet users who helped another person deal with a major illness ...	26%
6. Of the Internet users who changed jobs ...	25%
7. Of the Internet users who dealt with a major illness themselves ...	24%
8. Of the Internet users who made a major investment or financial decision ...	22%
9. Of the Internet users who found a new place to live...	22%
10. Of the Internet users who started a new romantic relationship ...	15%
11. Of the Internet users who ended a romantic relationship ...	15%
12. Of the Internet users who got married ...	14%
13. Of the Internet users who became involved in a lawsuit, criminal case or other legal action ...	13%
14. Of the Internet users who received a major promotion or raise ...	10%
15. Of the Internet users who got divorced ...	0%

*Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, January 2002 Internet tracking survey. N=1,415 Internet users. Margin of error for the overall sample of Internet users is plus or minus 3 percentage points and is higher than that for various subpopulations.*

This list illustrates that, among the issues we asked about, the role of the Internet was most pronounced for those looking for schools and colleges and least pronounced for those who got promotions or raises – and not at all a factor among those we sampled who had recently been through a divorce.

Generally, younger Americans – those under 30 – were the most likely to have undergone several of the big changes in their lives or faced major decisions in recent times. However, there was no indication that the Internet played any different role in these decisions or activities for young Americans than it did for older Americans.

As is often the case with Internet use, those with considerable experience online – those who had been online at least three years – were the most likely to turn to the Internet when they were facing a major moment, and they were the most likely to report that the material they found online played a serious role in their decisions. This is further evidence from our research that the longer someone has been online, the more likely that person is to use the Internet as a tool for serious research and important life activities.

### **Further analysis**

We asked all the respondents to our January survey about 15 major decisions or events that might occur in people's lives, and whether they had gone through any of the 15 in the past two years. Then we asked the Internet users in our sample whether their use of the Internet had a crucial impact, an important impact, a minor impact, or no impact on their living through that major event or making that major decision. Our list was not exhaustive. Rather, it was meant to probe a representative spectrum of issues and events that arise in people's lives.

We found that 91% of all Americans have made at least one of these big decisions or lived through at least one of these major moments in the past two years. Among Internet users, the figure is 96%; for non-Internet users, the figure is 83%.

Some 45% of Internet users say the Internet has played a crucial or important role in at least one of the major moments we asked about.

#### ***Choosing schools***

More than 32 million Internet users (or 28% of Internet users) say they chose a school or college for themselves or their children in the past two years. Of those people, 36% say the Internet played a crucial or important role in that choice. An additional 32% say the Internet played a minor role in that choice. Those who were the most likely to say the Internet was important to their decision were minorities and younger Americans.

#### ***Starting a hobby***

Almost a third (30%) of Internet users say they recently started a new hobby. That comes to more than 34 million people. Some 33% of those new hobbyists say the Internet played a crucial or important role in their taking up a new activity. We have consistently found in our surveys, including this one, that men are more likely than women to use the Internet to pursue hobbies. Thus, it is not surprising to see in this survey that twice as many men as women reported the Internet played either a crucial or an important role when they decided to begin a new hobby. Online veterans were also much more likely

than less-experienced users to have exploited the Internet as they found new leisure activities.

### ***Getting additional education or training for a career***

Fully 41% of Internet users – a figure that represents more than 47 million people – have done this in the past two years. In this group, 29% reported that their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in their securing the training. An additional 27% of this group said the Internet played a minor role. More women than men reported that the Internet had an impact on their experience. And online veterans with more than three years' experience were particularly aggressive in using the Internet for extra training. Fully a third of the experienced users who had upgraded their skills said their use of the Internet played a major role in that training or educational advancement.

### ***Buying a car***

Fully 45% of Internet users say they were in the market to buy a car in the past two years. That represents more than 52 million people. Of those, 27% said their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in getting the car, and 22% said it played a minor role. There was no significant difference among men and women among those who reported an impact. However, online veterans (those online for more than three years) were particularly fervent in their Internet use as they hunted for cars. Fully a third of the experienced users said their online data collection played a major role in their car shopping.

### ***Treating illnesses – helping others as well as helping themselves***

About 39% of Internet users – a figure that represents more than 45 million people – say they have helped another person dealing with a major illness in the past two years. Of those in this category, 26% say their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in their aid to the other person. Additionally, 31% of this group report that the Internet played a minor role.

Substantially more women than men use the Internet to search for health and medical information, so it is hardly surprising here that more women than men report that the Internet played an important role when they faced a care-giving situation. This was also particularly important for those ages 50 through 64.

In another question, respondents were asked if they had dealt with an illness themselves in the past two years. Seventeen percent said yes; that amounts to 21 million people. In this group, 24% said their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role as they coped with their illness. Again, women were twice as likely as men to report that their use of the Internet played an important or crucial role for them. And those ages 50 through 64 were more likely than other age groups to report a significant impact from their use of the Internet.

### ***Changing jobs***

Some 28% of Internet users – more than 32 million people – reported changing jobs within the past two years. Among those in this category, 25% reported that the Internet

played a crucial or important role in their job search. An additional 17% reported that their use of the Internet played a role in that change. Internet use for job searches was particularly important to minority job seekers, those in the 18-to-29 age bracket, those who are college graduates, and those who live in households earning more than \$75,000.

### ***Making a major investment or financial decision***

More than 40 million Internet users say they have made a major investment or financial decision in the past two years. Of this group, 22% say their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in their decision. Another 26% say the Internet played a minor role as they made their decision. Men were considerably more likely than women to report that their use of the Internet had an impact on the decision. And Internet veterans were five times more likely than Internet newcomers to have gone online and been helped in their quest for information related to investments.

### ***Finding a new place to live***

About a third of our sample of Internet users (32%) say they had found a new place to live in the past two years. That amounts to more than 37 million people. Some 22% of this group say the Internet had a crucial or important role in their housing hunt. Nearly a third of veteran Internet users who had searched for new housing said the Internet played a major role in their search. Those living in households earning more than \$75,000 were also among the most likely to cite the importance of their Internet use in a housing search.

### ***Falling in and out of love***

Relatively small percentages of Internet users began or ended romances or got married or divorced in the past two years. About 15 million people (or 13% of Internet users) say they started a new romantic relationship in the last two years, compared with 14% who say they had recently broken ties with a significant other. In both cases, 15% in each group say the Internet played a crucial role in the event. Those ages 18 through 29 are somewhat more likely than those in other age groups to say their use of the Internet had a role in their love life.

The numbers are even lower when marriage is concerned. About 7% of Internet users (about 8 million people) got married in the past two years. Some 14% in this group say the Internet played an important or crucial role in their marriage. No one in the group of Internet users who got divorced – about 5% of the overall Internet population – reported in our sample that the Internet played any role in his or her divorce.

### ***Getting involved with the law***

Less than a tenth of Internet users say they became involved in a lawsuit, criminal case, or other legal action in the past two years. About 9 million Internet users (8% of them) found themselves on one side or another of the legal system in the past two years. About 13% of them say the role of the Internet was important or crucial in their coping with an entanglement with the law, and an equal proportion say the Internet played a minor role.

### ***Gaining promotions and raises***

Some 29% of Internet users (a percentage that represents more than 33 million people) say they received a major promotion or raise at work in the past two years. About 13% of them say their use of the Internet played a crucial or important role in their career advancement. Another 13% say their use of the Internet played a minor role. There were no significant demographic differences among those who had used the Internet in their quest for promotions – equal proportions of men, women, racial and ethnic groups, and people with different educational attainment and incomes reported that the Internet had played a role in their promotion or raise. However, Internet veterans were considerably more likely than others to say they had gone online for information that helped them get raises or promotions.

### ***Problems caused by Internet use***

Besides asking about troubles that were related to the law, we also asked an open-ended question about whether people felt they had encountered any major problems in their lives that they thought were caused by Internet use. The vast majority (94%) said none. Those who report problems caused by Internet use say the following: 2% of Internet users say family members are spending too much time online, 1% say they encountered major problems with computer viruses, 1% say they had problems stemming from their access to pornography, gambling, and online games, and the rest cite ergonomic problems, such as eyesight strain and joint pain, or unspecified problems.

## **Methodology**

This report is based on the findings of a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the Internet. The results in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates between January 3, 2002, and January 31, 2002, among a sample of 2,391 adults, 18 and older. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 2 percentage points. For results based on Internet users (n=1,415), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The sample for this survey is a random-digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States. The random-digit aspect of the sample is used to avoid “listing” bias and provides representation of both listed and unlisted numbers (including not-yet-listed numbers). The design of the sample achieves this representation by random generation of the last two digits of telephone numbers selected on the basis of their area code, telephone exchange, and bank number.

New sample was released daily and was kept in the field for at least five days. This ensures that complete call procedures were followed for the entire sample. Additionally, the sample was released in replicates to make sure that the telephone numbers called were distributed appropriately across different regions of the country. At least 10 attempts were made to complete an interview at every household in the sample. The calls were

staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Interview refusals were recontacted at least once in order to try again to complete an interview. All interviews completed on any given day were considered to be the final sample for that day. The response rate on this survey was 33.5%.

Non-response in telephone interviews produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in analysis. The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (March 2001). This analysis produces population parameters for the demographic characteristics of adults age 18 or older living in households that contain a telephone. These parameters are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distribution of all weighting parameters.

Throughout this report, the survey results are used to estimate the approximate number of Americans, in millions, who engage in Internet activities. These figures are derived from the Census Bureau's estimates of the number of adults living in telephone households in the continental United States. As with all survey results, these figures are estimates. Any given figure could be somewhat larger or smaller, given the margin of sampling error associated with the survey results used in deriving these figures.