

Do-It-Yourself Online People Searching

If you need to locate an old friend, relative, associate or lover who you haven't seen in months or years, read on.

People search is one of those areas of research where the Internet really shines. If you know the person's name and some other identifying info about him/her, you can probably locate him via the Internet pretty quickly. If the person is deceased, you can find that out, too.

But be cautious, it's not simply a question of googling the person's name. You have to have a bit of knowhow in online people-search. Here are a few of the possible problems you can run into --

-Your subject has a common name -- Smith, Mitchell, Jones, Wilson, etc.

-Your (female) subject has gotten married and has a new surname.

-He/she simply doesn't want to be found. For example, maybe the person is hiding from creditors. It's not uncommon, which is why there's a huge skip tracing industry out there.

-The person is in one of the branches of the military.

-Your subject has passed away -- is deceased.

I'll suggest ways to deal with these complications later in this article. However, be aware there's never an absolute guarantee you'll find your man or woman. It's a fact that some people just can't be found. Most can, though, with a little informed searching.

Incidentally, did you know the phrase people search is one of the most commonly searched keyword phrases entered on Google? Every day thousands of people try to find someone, most commonly an old acquaintance, school friend, military buddy, or girl/boyfriend using an Internet search engine. Yet most don't locate their subject this way. You'll only find him/her using a search engine if the person is noteworthy in some way -- has written a book, has their name on a web site, has been in the news, etc. Probably 19 out of 20 people can't be found just using a search engine. You usually need other types of online tools.

Online People-Search Tools (All Free)

OK, notwithstanding all that, go ahead and run a quick Google search, maybe you'll get lucky. But even if you find someone with your subject's name listed on Google, are you sure it's the person you're looking for? If the name is at all common, you probably aren't. Identification can be a problem. Stop and think. What do you know about your subject other than his/her name? Do you know the geographic area the person lives in or probably lives in (or used to live in)? That narrows your search down a good deal right there. How about date of birth or age? Either of those identifiers can be important if your subject has a common name. What about a former street address? That can be helpful should you need to go to more advanced methods of search later (as I'll discuss below).

If your subject has a very uncommon name, or if you know his/her likely city or even state of residence, you can try using one of the online directories. Two good ones are Addresses.com, and WhoWhere.com. Just enter whatever information you have -- name, city, state, etc. and give it a try. If you get a likely-looking hit, give him/her a call or send a letter explaining your purpose and that you're not sure you've got the right person. See what reaction you get. But the online directories often don't work. For various reasons, your subject isn't listed. So what do you do then? Here are some other free online people-search tools to try:

- If you think it's likely he/she may be in the military, visit gisearch.com.

- If you remember the person's high school, try classmates.com.

- Is your subject into fishing or hunting (as one-third of adult males are)? Check to find out if he/she has a fishing or hunting license. Try backgroundcheckgateway.com/huntfish.html

- Try a news search or periodical search. For this you'll have to guess your subject's likely city-of-residence, then search archives of a local newspaper or magazine in that city or region. Just go to Newspapers.com or NewsLink.org.

- Check voters registration records. Again, you have to guess at your subject's most likely area of residence. Many people don't realize that voters registration records are public information, so even if they're trying to keep a low profile they can often be found in this way.

- Do you know your subject's occupation/profession? Possibly you can locate him/her through his professional association or licensing board.

- Might your subject be deceased? Check the Master Death Index.

Telephone Techniques

If your online searches didn't pan out for you, you've got a hard case but don't give up. Try these telephone techniques.

- Call the State Department of Motor Vehicles in his/her likely state of residence and ask to have a name search run while you wait. This one's a favorite of private investigators and nearly always works, provided his/her state-of-residence permits this type of search. (California, among a few others, doesn't.)

- Call his former employer and ask to be connected to the Human Resources Department. Explain that you need to locate the person and ask if they can tell you his/her present employer. Most employers won't provide this information but some will. It's worth a try.

- Call the local utility company (e.g., the electric company) and ask the customer service rep if your subject is listed as one of their customers; if so, request his address. Be open about your reasons for the request. Addresses are public information, so the rep should comply with your request.

- Call relatives and neighbors. You can locate former neighbors using a reverse-directory website like Anywho.com. However, before you make the calls, read the following section for a few pointers.

Some of the Finer Points of the Trade

Skip-tracing is in fact a finely-honed art which has been around for many many decades. Traditionally, it's been done almost completely via the telephone by people who've made a profession out of it. Almost always, the purpose of the skip trace has been financial -- locating a skip who has vanished owing debts.

Although readers of this article will probably be searching for friends or relatives, not financial deadbeats, it's worth going over a few of the tried-and-true principles of skip tracing (e.g., people search), especially if you will need to use the telephone in your searching. Here's what veterans of skip tracing advise --

- Whenever speaking to a possible source of information, always remember to start by saying, "I wonder if you could help me." This puts the person in a cooperative, nondefensive frame of mind.

- When placing a call to the skip's last known address, ask in a casual tone of voice to speak to him/her -- for example, "Hi, I'd like to speak to Bill." If the person who answers the phone says he's not there or doesn't live there, then ask if the person knows where he lives.

- Always attempt to enlist allies in your search, say the pros. Be courteous and personable to a fault to whomever you speak. Never take an adversarial approach. Always aim at establishing good will and cooperation.

Points to Keep in Mind about People-Searching

- People searching used to be nearly impossible for the average person. Nowadays, thanks to the Internet, you can usually find your subject in minutes.

-That said, not everybody can be found, even if you work long and hard at it.

-Always start your search in the most obvious, simple way. For example, if you know your subject lives in Minneapolis, just call Minneapolis long-distance telephone information and ask for an area-wide search. Or try a free online search service like, Whowhere.com.

-If that doesn't work, try to recall what you know about the person and then use specialized searches. Did he have a hunting license? What college did he/she go to? Etc. etc.

-Still looking? Try using the telephone techniques suggested above if finding the person is important to you.

-If you can't find your subject despite your best efforts or if you're in a hurry, you may wish to consider using a fee-based people-search service. Even these are not a hundred percent effective but they do have access to many proprietary databases you can't access and may be able to find him/her for you right away. A couple of the best-known are USSearch and Intelius but you can find many others on any search engine.

About the Author

Joseph Ryan is Director of Washington Research Associates, Inc., Washington DC. The firm's website, [Web Search Guides](#) provides helpful 10-minute tutorials on topics of current interest, such as people searching, asset-searching, online shopping, student financing, and many others.

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