

FIGHTING Information Overload

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus, an evil king was condemned to Hades to forever roll a big rock to the top of a mountain, and then the rock always rolled back down again. A similar version of Hell is suffered every day by people with forever full email boxes - a very common example of a universally growing phenomenon called information overload.

The work environment of today increasingly bombards the executive with piles of relevant and irrelevant information thanks to rapid advances in technology. Skimming through the bunch of data to find relevant pieces of information and in a limited amount of time is a challenge executives face today.

George Orwell, an early twentieth century British author once remarked that "the average person today is about as naive as was the average person in the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages people believed in the authority of their religion, no matter what. Today, we believe in the authority of our science, no matter what."

While the number of hours available at hand has remained same and the inherent capacity to absorb information hasn't drastically improved over the years, the need to access, understand and digest information had gone up many times demanding extra skills and time to manage the increasing data input.

This problem has given rise to new methodologies and solutions like Knowledge Management that helps organizations generate, use information and cultivate knowledge out of the existing chaotic environment.

Extent and repercussions of information overload

Facing information overload is not easy. It often brings with it the tendency to executives that they will miss out on something if they do not review all available data before making a decision. And this has effects not only on the work and productivity but also on the physical and psychological health levels of individuals.

During a survey carried out in 1998, one in four of over 1,300 managers surveyed, admitted to actually suffering ill health as a result of the amount of information they handle. Ironically, half agreed high levels of information were required in order to perform effectively.

Information overload usually leads to unwanted results in the form of

- ✘ Wastage of valuable organization time (it is estimated that an average knowledge worker spends almost 30% of his time searching for the right information - that's 600 hours a year)

- ✘ Disturbance in set priorities and distraction from main job responsibilities

- ✘ Stress

- ✘ Possible loss of job satisfaction

- ✘ Physical illness

Psychologist Dr. David Lewis, an internationally known Psychologist, Consultant and Lecturer, analyzed the findings of the survey and commented: "Information Fatigue Syndrome - having too much information - can be as dangerous as having too little. Among other problems, it can lead to a paralysis of analysis, making it far harder to find the right solutions or make the best decisions."

Solution

Fighting information overload requires some strategic as well a tactical measures on the part of the organization as a whole down to the individual who's accessing the information. The following measures are listed to assist executives and managers control the information they receive and not let the information overload control them.

Focus and articulation of needs

The first step to controlling information overload is to precisely articulate the information need. Knowing what is needed out of the research helps weed out unnecessary review of data outside the desired scope and saves a lot of time. This involves establishing boundaries and deadlines to the information finding process.

Using filters while accepting information from different sources helps generate desired type of data which can be further reviewed. A common example is setting filters for capturing critical urgent mails from a whole lot and weeding out junk mails from email inboxes.

Signposts and road maps

After deciding on the information required to be search, if executives are provided with sign posts and guides telling where specific information can be searched, an organization can help save their (and its own) time. Examples of this are online corporate directories that list every employee with contact details and field of expertise, technical dictionary etc. On a personal level managers and executives can create their own road maps and a list of favorites (websites, periodicals, books) that act as shortcuts taking the executive one step ahead in their information searching process.

Access to quality information

Key to information management is focusing on the quality of the data you receive. But determining quality can be tough says Christopher Oliver, an orthopedic surgeon and director of faculty at the Royal College of Surgeons, in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Your results can only be as good as the information you use to derive them. Good quality of information not only provides credible data but also saves time by not requiring the executive search further for a second opinion. But it is not easy determining the quality of information. While the credibility of the source is a basic and an obvious indicator, factors such as whether the information required is sponsored or neutral (to test bias), the currency of data that was used in making information out of it and studying whether the information is 'massaged' to provoke a particular belief, can help in deciding.

Guidance

Organizations should provide support and guidance to executives in helping them find information they need fast. This is done by employing personnel and systems in place specifically to aid in the information searching process. Organizations usually appoint an information manager as he is usually called to manage online libraries of information to help and guide executives find pertinent information. Information technology based systems such as Intranets and its modules like document management and intelligent search engines do their bit in this aspect.

Research has found out that executives and managers trust their peers for quick information than wanting to access the existing knowledge infrastructure provided by the organization in form of electronically stored documents or hard copies. Recognizing these trend organizations have started formalizing peer to peer conversations in the form of collaborative applications that facilitate discussions between two executives for sharing information and knowledge.

Limiting information sourcing

A key to weed out unnecessary and time consuming information is to tune out unnecessary sources of information. Executives have to realize that access to unnecessary media has to be curtailed to ensure focus on the matter at hand and avoid distractions. Also it is necessary to accept that not all relevant data can be researched before making a decision - organizations executives have to realize when to stop gathering information and move on to decision making.

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