

Information overload

Most businesses think of dealing with information overload – few consider reducing the amount of information they deal with. Considering most businesses have information pathways that are already clogged by surfeit of information, this attitude doesn't help.

People start creeping in early just to deal with their email inbox. Some poor swine gets the job of sending out a weekly digest. Very few businesses undertake any detailed analysis of the information they are asking staff to deal with, its intrinsic usefulness and whether people are any more effective once they have read it.

Information should be read before it is passed on to anybody else. The problem with email is it is so easy to bounce unread information and make it somebody else's problem.

One company boss hit the newspaper headlines a few years ago by announcing he was banning email (yeah, right). Anyway, email can be a very good way of cascading relevant information through a hierarchy.

Here are some good rules for dealing with your information load, in particular, but not exclusively, what you receive online.

Rule 1

Individuals within an organisation have to take responsibility for the reading, removal or dissemination of information that comes to them. And deal with it contemporaneously.

Don't do the email bounce. If it gets to the stage where an email has four people's input on it - start a fresh email, outline the cumulative key points so far in a sentence or two and - most importantly - why you are now sending it to the person you are sending it to.

Rule 2

Read information before you send it on and only send it on if you think there is a direct relevance to the person you are sending it to.



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Ideally, flag up the relevant section or paragraph. Better still, send them a précis of what you have read and tell them where they can go to find out more - such as a URL. The central idea is not to increase an employee's capacity for information but to refine and define the information stream.

Rule 3

Don't skim off the top. The temptation is to skim off the most relevant or actionable material from your virtual or actual inbox without assessing what's left.

People deal with critical information – such as bills – and add less critical information to a notional Must Read pile, which they rarely, if ever, get round to. Often information from this pile is ditched without ever being assessed, simply because an inbox gets too full or a pile of unread papers topples onto the floor.

Rule 4

Just because the boss wrote it doesn't make it more important. It isn't just external information that companies have to deal with and refine. Internally generated information is often given a sanctity it doesn't deserve.

When generating internal communications the first rule of thumb should be – only those with something to say should talk. When it comes to written information this translates into: we only write things down – for other people to read – when we have something to say. Status reports, which effectively say nothing in a department has changed, are no use. Internally generated information should progress the corporate case. It should tell people things they do not already know and keep them up to date with change – not inaction.

Rule 5

It's not what you write but the way that you write it. Think scientist - not artist. Even if information is pertinent it still needs to be written in such a way that it can be easily read and assessed and the core data retained.

The way the copy is "crafted" is crucial in this respect and there are a number of disciplines that can be used to keep the copy interesting, succinct and easily navigable.

The not so small print

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Text needs to be structured in such a way that people can dip in and out of what is on offer. It's useful to explore hypertext disciplines even when writing for offline.

Traditional hard copy text can be restructured in a way that is non-sequential but intuitive and meaningful – allowing people to jump sections, amass key points and if necessary, review.

Think of including a “If you read nothing else - read this” box - what we call a RT box for short - at the bottom of longer pieces. If you can write a good RT box with all the salient points in it, ask yourself why you need to write anything longer?

Finally, we give you an acronym passed on to us by another business. If you remember nothing else, remember TRASH:

With the information you receive you should do one of these things -

- T** - Throw it away
- R** - Refer it to *one* person after you have read it and decided it's not relevant to you
- A** - Answer it
- S** - Store it *if* there is a good reason using monthly folders, which you then delete after, say, 3 months
- H** - Halt it but telling the person who is sending you irrelevant drivel to stop.