



The staggering cost of information overload

Communication World Bulletin

By Bill Boyd, ABC

Recently, I was waiting for a meeting to begin at a 500-person professional services firm. An item on the bulletin board caught my eye. It was a memo from the CFO. If everyone in the firm could spend an hour less per day managing email, he said, it would make a difference of \$2 million a year to the company.

I don't know how he arrived at that number (and I believe it's quite conservative), but I have to give him credit—not many companies would publish a number like that. In fact, I haven't seen many companies that have even tried to figure it out.

This may seem like a problem for HR or IT—but I believe it falls squarely in communications territory. It's our responsibility to help our employers and clients understand how clogged communications channels are costing very real dollars—just like rush hour on the Long Island Expressway wastes untold gallons of increasingly precious gasoline.

Let's take a look at four aspects of infoglut that reduce the "MPG" of our communications:

Lost productivity

What does an hour of employee time cost? In U.S. knowledge organizations, it can easily average \$50 including benefits—more if you add in everything it takes to support an employee.

In a 1,000-person organization, if you can eliminate five minutes of wasted time, you've saved \$4,167. Do that every weekday for a year, and you've freed up more than \$1 million worth of productivity. Make it 10 minutes a day, and you've saved \$2 million plus. (That's why I think the CFO's estimate above is on the low side.)

What gobbles up all that time with no benefit to the company? The mechanics of email, for starters. Sorting through the hundreds of messages in your in-box. Deleting messages you never should have received (cc's and distribution lists are big culprits here). Filing messages you might need someday. Frantically nuking emails—or dragging them into folders—so the "send" button will work once again.

The problem isn't just time spent on low-value activities. Interrupting employees is costly. Research shows that every time an employee must refocus his or her attention, it takes time and energy to mentally switch from Topic A to Topic B and back again.

In 2000, Pitney Bowes teamed up with the Institute for the Future to measure the number of messages employees receive daily. In Fortune 1000 companies that number was 168—via phone, email, voicemail, postal mail, interoffice mail, fax and cell phone. That was five years ago; today you'd need to significantly up the email count, and add in instant messaging, SMS, RSS and other new ways to contact employees.

Time spent finding information

Beyond the time spent processing the high volume of messages lies another problem. Employees spend a huge amount of their time looking for information they can't find—or recreating information that already exists.

IDC wrote about this for *KM World* magazine last year. The numbers they cite are mind-boggling:

"Recent research on knowledge work shows that knowledge workers spend more time recreating existing information than they do turning out information that does not already exist. Some studies suggest that 90% of the time that knowledge workers spend in creating new reports or other products is spent in recreating information that already exists."

Using a hypothetical company that employed 1,000 knowledge workers who earn an average salary plus benefits of \$80,000 a year, IDC calculated that:

"The time spent looking for and not finding information costs our mythical organization a total of \$6 million a year. That doesn't include opportunity costs or the costs of reworking information that exists but can't be located.

"The cost of reworking information because it hasn't been found costs that organization a further \$12 million a year (15% of time spent in duplicating existing information).

"Not locating and retrieving information has an opportunity cost of more

than \$15 million annually. Accelerating the introduction of a blockbuster drug or delaying its demotion to generic status by just one day through use of information access software could mean \$8.5 million or more each day.”

Diminished quality of thought

IDC points out that there are other factors that are just as real—but impossible to measure. For instance, how much would an organization gain if its employees could spend more time thinking about the business and less time searching for information? How much better would their decisions be if they really understood their company’s direction—and the marketplace forces that shape it?

There’s also new evidence linking info-bombardment with decreased ability to think. Hewlett Packard recently teamed up with the University of London to study the impact of constant information barrage on intelligence. Here’s how HP describes the results:

“In a series of tests carried out by Dr. Glenn Wilson, Reader in Personality at the Institute of Psychiatry, University of London, an average worker’s functioning IQ falls ten points when distracted by ringing telephones and incoming emails. This drop in IQ is more than double the four point drop seen following studies on the impact of smoking marijuana.”

The Guardian summarizes the study more colorfully:

“Doziness, lethargy and an increasing inability to focus reached ‘startling’ levels in the trials by 1,100 people, who also demonstrated that emails in particular have an addictive, drug-like grip.

“Respondents’ minds were all over the place as they faced new questions and challenges every time an email dropped into their inbox. Productivity at work was damaged and the effect on staff who could not resist trying to juggle new messages with existing work was the equivalent, over a day, to the loss of a night’s sleep.

“‘This is a very real and widespread phenomenon,’ said Glenn Wilson, a psychologist from King’s College, London University, who carried out 80 clinical trials for TNS research, commissioned by the IT firm Hewlett Packard. The average IQ loss was measured at 10 points, more than double the four point mean fall found in studies of cannabis users.

“The most damage was done, according to the survey, by the almost complete lack of discipline in handling emails. Dr. Wilson and his colleagues found a compulsion to reply to each new message, leading to constant changes of direction which inevitably tired and slowed down the brain.”

HP is discouraging “always-on” communications in its own company, and has created a downloadable “Guide to Avoiding Info-Mania” to help others.

The human costs

I recently flew from the Midwest to Seattle. My seatmate was a recruiter for a high-tech corporation. And she was under such stress that she was about ready to resign.

“I spend my life dealing with email,” she said. “I shouldn’t even take the time to talk with you.”

But talk she did. The flow of email was relentless, she said. On a “quiet afternoon,” more than 200 messages dropped into her in-box, all clamoring for her attention. She spent much of the flight trying to cope with the latest deluge—knowing that more awaited her when she landed.

“I’m usually a positive person,” she said. “I don’t like what this job has done to me. It’s a job I wanted, but I may need to leave it so I can get back to who I am.”

Stressed-out employees like my seatmate are not likely to contribute the creativity, innovation, imagination and energy their organizations need to compete. Stress costs industry over \$300 billion a year in the United States, over \$16 billion a year in Canada, and

as much as £7.3 billion in the United Kingdom, says Ravi Tangri, founder of Chrysalis Performance Technologies.

In his book *Stress Costs, Stress-Cures*, Tangri says stress is responsible for 19 percent of absenteeism, 40 percent of turnover, 55 percent of employee-assistance program costs—and much more.

To what extent does information overload directly fuel stress? In the short term, probably not as much as, say, widespread layoffs. But, longer term, the unrelenting feeling that you can’t keep up with the demands for your attention and mindpower can take a heavy toll—and doubtless contributes to the high cost of stress.

So how do we reduce stress, curtail interruptions, make information more accessible and free up productivity? There’s much more we can do—from helping people better manage incoming messages to changing the behavior of senders to applying alternative technologies.

Communicators need to give this their urgent attention. But until we prove to executives that information overload is a problem that is costing them hard dollars (or pounds, euros, rupees or yen), it’s unlikely we’ll get the resources to tackle it in any meaningful way.

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