# The Dark Side of Information Overload

Insight from Nathan Zeldes, August 29, 2012

## The irrationality of email usage

**What I find fascinating** about Information Overload in organizations is that there's so much more to it than meets the eye.

**At first glance it might seem simple:** there are too many emails being sent around, too many idiots who abuse Reply to All (the first complaint you always hear), too little time to clear the Inbox... and so the solutions seem obvious: ask people to send less messages to smaller distributions, and all will be well! Which accounts for the popularity of optimistic advice like "Don't copy unneeded recipients " and "Take time to write a clear message to benefit your recipient". This would be useful enough, except that people **want** to copy everybody, and they hardly have time to invest in their recipients' well-being. When it comes to email overload, altruism is a rare virtue: it's a jungle out there. Sad, but true – and for a good reason.

**When I started studying Information Overload at Intel** in the nineties, it didn't take me long to realize that there was a deeper reason for it than people were usually aware of. I'd interview managers and engineers and find them in a love/hate relationship with their Inbox; for example, a person who'd just complained about too much mail would be horrified once I suggested they get off distribution lists for messages they didn't even read. Getting people to stop over-copying their coworkers is a tough sell; as for the destructive perception that you need to reply to every mail the minute it comes into your smartphone, day or night – stopping that is harder than pulling teeth. I once ran an experiment in an engineering team and failed to get them to budge on this one despite the full support of their managers. In fact, a client who had brought me in to help had told me he'd failed to get even his direct reports to change their errant ways – and he was their CEO!

**Why would intelligent, normally rational employees** refuse to change behaviors that they know are harmful to themselves, their peers and their companies? This is where it gets interesting.

## The secret cause of Information Overload

**There are diverse yet related reasons** for the destructive messaging behaviors seen in most organizations. Over many years of surveying and interviewing knowledge workers I've observed many of them:

- People want to impress others – notably their boss – by showing email activity at all hours.
- People are reluctant to go off distribution lists for fear of being left out of "the know".
- People insist on producing redundant status reports, and their boss condones this for fear of offending them.
- People want to receive lots of email because it bolsters their self image of being important.
- People stay on lists for fear of offending the sender if they ask to "unsubscribe".
- People send unneeded mail to create a paper trail, to cover themselves in case of future disagreement or finger-pointing.

- People copy an action request to the recipient's manager, either as a pressure tactic or as a veiled threat of future escalation.
- People react to the beep of their Blackberries at all hours, because they perceive an unstated expectation that one must reply to email instantly – or be stigmatized.

**And what's common to all these causes** of excessive sending (or receiving) is the underlying root cause: **Mistrust**. People don't trust their boss to value and reward the *results* of their work rather than the appearance of activity that email creates. People don't trust their coworkers to tell them what they need to know to do their job. People don't trust their organization to believe them unless they can point to a paper trail. And so on.

## Email and the tragedy of the commons

**Mistrust**, then, can lead to multiple harmful behaviors in Information Overload space. This mistrust easily comes into existence in a culture pervaded by over-competitiveness, status and turf wars, and stress, which are present to various degrees in almost all companies. I've been referring to them collectively as "The Dark Side of Information Overload", and they have a real presence in the murky undercurrents below the surface of the corporate culture. The formal culture, with its mission statements and values emphasizing fairness and cooperation, never acknowledges this Dark Side; but the employees can unerringly identify it and respond with defensive measures that can result in anything but cooperation.

The situation always reminds me of that well-known scenario from Game Theory, the Prisoner's Dilemma (or, more correctly, its multiplayer version known as the Tragedy of the Commons). What we have is a situation where everyone would benefit strongly from there being less email going around; yet no one is willing to – can afford to, some would put it – cut back on their own outgoing mail volume. Similarly, everyone would love to turn off their Blackberry before dinner; yet no one will risk being the first one to do so. What if I do that, they think, and nobody else does? In a culture of mistrust, who knows what the consequences might be come the next annual performance review?

## What you can do about this

**In an ideal world,** subordinates would trust their managers to reward them for their real work output without needing any reminders or redundant reporting; people could trust their bosses and peers to feed them only the information they need, in real time; there would be no need of CYA and pressure tactics to get cooperation from one's team mates. In that ideal world, everyone would just do their work at their best with no worries about status, hurt egos, competition or obstructionism.

I wish we could all live in that world, but instead we live in this one; and in this world, we need to address the Dark Side if we're to have a chance of eliminating information overload in the workplace.

Mind you, I'm not saying all causes of the Information Overload problem stem from this "Dark side". There are other causes, among them sub-optimal tools, insufficient technical training and poor English language skills (especially in global companies). But the issues related to a culture of mistrust are the most difficult to overcome, for two reasons:

- Not every organization is willing to look into the dark side. The implication that one's corporate culture includes an element of mistrust is hard to swallow (though of course, as the legendary W. Edwards Deming had stated in his principles of Total Quality Management, fear and mistrust are very common in organizations). It’s easier to hang up a poster of email etiquette rules and ignore the deeper issues.

- Unless you really change the underlying culture, people will not cooperate with any other solution attempts (if you doubt this, try to ask someone to reduce the frequency or distribution of their status reports... or consider reducing your own, for that matter!) Unfortunately, changing organizational culture is a notoriously difficult task.

**So what management really needs to do** is accept that the IO problem probably has a cultural root, and resolve to address it seriously. Doing so requires top down support from senior management, without which a culture change is doomed from the start. It requires patience – it takes many months to effect such a change. And of course it requires going through a professionally managed problem solving flow: characterize the initial situation, identify the gaps that need fixing, develop a solution set, deploy it, collect data, and so on all the way to making the change sustainable and monitoring it in the long term.

But then, large organizations know how to run an improvement project. If you work in one, just make sure you apply this knowledge to solving Information Overload, and be careful to uncover and address all its causes – including, with a vengeance, those lurking in the Dark Side!

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**Nathan Zeldes has been working on Info Overload for 18 years**, during which he’s developed and deployed original solutions at Intel and other companies. He’s exchanged knowledge and solutions with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now advises managers on solving this problem in their groups.

**For more insight on Information Overload**, check out Nathan’s blog at www.nathanzeldes.com and consider subscribing to his RSS feed and to his Newsletter on that site.