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Effects of Information Overload, #3: Degraded Work Processes

Insight from Nathan Zeldes, Nov. 28, 2012

This is one of a series of articles that analyze the negative effects of Information Overload in an enterprise setting (though many of the points noted apply to individual knowledge workers, such as small business owners, as well). Previous articles are available [here](#).

The breakdown of organizational processes

The previous two articles in this [series](#) focused on the impact of information overload on the individual knowledge worker. But no man is an island, and these workers form part of teams and organizations. Information overload has started to play havoc with organizational processes in the nineties, and by now we're so used to this that we barely remember the cause as we live with effects that we simply take for granted. Below I investigate how information overload is breaking vital processes in practically all knowledge-based organizations.

Broken process 1: Effective meetings

Two obvious aspects of work meetings are their ubiquity – knowledge workers, and especially managers, spend a significant fraction of their workday in them – and their utter ineffectiveness. This was highlighted by a [survey](#) run among 38,000 Microsoft employees worldwide that had found they spend on average 5.6 hours a week in meetings, and that 69% of them consider meetings to be unproductive. Of course other corporations would show similar results.

While every knowledge worker is aware of the problem with meetings, not all are aware of the crucial role information overload had played in causing it. Meeting attendees spend much of the time “doing email” – trying, in vain, to empty their overflowing Inbox on their laptop or smartphone. Typically even the manager who will need to make a decision is ignoring the presentation being made to inform that very decision. In virtual meetings the situation is even worse, with attendees exempted from even a pretense of paying attention. And interruptions from ringing cellphones cause attendees to phase in and out of almost every meeting.

Meetings are a key element of an organization's function: they're designed to be exuberant hubs of brainstorming, knowledge sharing, discussion, and decision making. But with everybody engrossed in email they've become a waste of time, and their critical role is a shadow of what it could have been.

I must point out that even before email people would bring a pile of paper mail to a meeting; but those piles were much smaller, and did not consume people to the same extent. Paper mail cost money to send, so there was less of it; and the desperation that forces people to battle their email inflow today was missing in those days.

Broken process 2: Team communications

A major objective of any mail system is to have people communicate, i.e. exchange messages back and forth. Sending out an email to a coworker used to guarantee a timely response; these days it is anybody's bet what the outcome will be. This creates the state known as "Online silence": the situation of not receiving a reply to a message, while lacking any indication of the reason. A sender can't even know whether a message has been seen, much less whether a reply is forthcoming, and if so, when. In effect, in the current state of overload, email is no longer a reliable communication channel.

This breakdown of communications has two dire consequences:

- Communications slow down, often requiring a number of resends until an answer is elicited. It is quite normal for days to elapse before a reply arrives, which slows work progress considerably, especially in global distributed teams that depend on email to bridge time zone gaps.
- Trust erodes. The lack of response breeds ambiguity, since it is unknown whether the message was willfully ignored, not yet opened, filtered away by some rule, left for later response, or simply lingers unnoticed under the avalanche. The silence can be misinterpreted as denoting coworker indifference or hostility. Research has confirmed that virtual teams in particular are adversely affected.

Broken process 3: Work planning

One major victim of email overload and interruptions in our ability to plan our work. This is true at two time scales, short term and long term.

Short term planning – the type conceptually managed via daily To Do lists – is affected because incoming messages make themselves known through various on-screen and audible alerts. Even ignoring these would create a cognitive drain (see the [previous article](#)), but most people can't ignore them and try to respond, certainly to phone calls, and often to incoming mail. This often results in the recipient doing a task for the caller or sender, for example answering a question, compiling and sending back materials, or filling a survey. The new task may be unrelated to the recipient's work plans and goals, or may be of a lower priority than whatever they were already doing; but it gets serviced anyway.

Not only are people doing this unplanned work instead of planned work in the short term, but they are derailed from adhering to their longer term plans. In pre-email times there used to be systems like *Management by Objectives* (MBO), and you needed to negotiate any shifting of resources: if Jane wanted Jack to do something for her, she'd need to seek approval from Jack and probably from his boss before priorities were modified to allow this, and timing of delivery would also be discussed based on Jack's MBO deadlines. By contrast, in today's environment Jane need only send Jack an email and ask him to do what she wants – if she's lucky he'll drop his own work and accommodate her, and if he doesn't, she can send the request to additional coworkers until one of them succumbs.

We can say that where knowledge workers used to be **plan-driven**, today we are **interrupt-driven**.

Broken process 4: People management

It seems strange that information overload might impact management interactions, but it's true. Keeping in mind that the more senior a manager, the more IO they suffer; and the more they suffer,

the less time they have to do what a manager should really do – empower, mentor and guide their subordinates.

Today's managers may be so stressed that it's impossible for a subordinate to get a timely email response (which in global teams may be their only option short of hopping a plane to accost the manager in person). And even when they get some quality time – say, in a one on one meeting – the manager will be in “[Continuous Partial Attention](#)”. As a corporate employee once told me: “Of the hour we have, half is lost to my manager taking cellular calls or rejecting them”.

But then, one on one meetings are themselves less common than they used to be, since managers have insufficient time to devote to interacting with their subordinates. They do, however, have the 20 hours a week – as my research at Intel had found – to devote to “doing email”, whether useful or not.

Conclusions and recommendations

These various processes impacted by information overload are quite diverse, but all are crucial to the proper functioning of any organization. Surely if you'd come to any CEO 25 years ago and suggested they agree to have these processes derailed, you'd meet a violent response – and yet that's exactly what has happened since then. Of course, the changes have crept up on us gradually, without anyone making an informed decision about them.

What is amazing, if you stop to think about it, is that people are willing to prioritize clearing their Inbox and responding to any callers at all times above interacting effectively with coworkers and subordinates, above effectively participating in meetings, above delivering on their employer's true priorities. This clearly counter-productive behavior has much to do with the addictive nature of the ubiquitous instant connectivity that underlies the modern world (and yes, there are researchers who claim it literally is a form of addiction, brain chemistry and all).

So how can you solve this problem? What is needed is a serious change in perceived and practiced priorities; given a choice between disconnecting from unnecessary email and disconnecting from one's team, we need a norm that puts the team process first. Making this change in an organization is a complex management challenge, but the first simple step must be to realize what is going on – which I hope this article will help you get a handle on.

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.