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Effects of Information Overload, #4: Quality of Life Impact

Insight from Nathan Zeldes, Dec. 27, 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 cruelest impact

The three previous articles in this series focused on impacts of information overload that primarily affect the knowledge intensive organization. This last one addresses an impact that victimizes the individual knowledge worker directly, although the damage inevitably extends to the organization employing this individual. This is the degradation of the employee's quality of life.

In a sense, this is the cruelest impact, for it doesn't merely make people ineffective (which it certainly does), it also makes them miserable, and reaches out to hurt their loved ones as well.

Quality of life outside the workplace

I recall a middle manager in hi-tech who had told me "I can't even go to a movie at night like I used to". This short remark captures the sad state of work in this day and age: people are so overloaded by their email that they need to work late into the night processing it, day after day (with scores, even hundreds of incoming messages a day, they can't even think of what will happen if they don't). In a data point from 2005 Hewlett-Packard cited research showing that 62 percent of adults are addicted to checking messages outside of office hours and while on holiday; my experience surveying people in the enterprise more recently shows that almost everyone does emails at night, and a majority does it in the weekend as well.

The immediate impact on Quality of Life is that there is simply **less** Life – in the sense of non-work time for relaxation, recreation, sport, reading... you know, *Life*. The modern workplace already demands long hours at the office from many employees and practically all managers; email has hijacked what's left of the week. Not only does it use up time that should be used to recharge oneself, it places people in a permanent state of "on call" – never able to put work out of their mind. This is of course especially true since the arrival of ubiquitous mobile devices that push new mail at the user in real time.

Even where some time remains, the rat race against the inbox may leave little stamina for enjoying it. This was already felt in the nineties, the decade that saw email overload become a major issue: Reuters had conducted a worldwide survey of 1,300 managers in 1996, and found that 61 percent of respondents say they cancel social activities as a result of information overload, while 60 percent are frequently too tired for leisure activities.

Also affected are vacations, where people now take their connectivity with them in the form of laptops or smartphones. Over my career I've witnessed the evolution of the "checking email on vacation" trend. In the early 90's you just couldn't, and vacations were vacations. In the late 90's there were already Internet cafés, and so when on vacation people might go there every couple of days and try to access their email, IF their employer made it accessible through the web. Then, as notebook computers became ubiquitous, people started taking them along, using the phone lines in their hotel rooms to get a connection into their office network. This was laborious enough that they'd do it maybe once a day. Then Wi-Fi made it easier, the BlackBerry revolution soon followed, and now they can check mail on either device as often as they want (or, rather, feel compelled to do).

Quality of life in the workplace

An impact on quality of life that is less widely recognized is what has happened to life at work. The basic fact is, knowledge work is much less fun than it used to be 30 years ago. If you're too young to remember, take my word for it: I was there.

The work environment of the post-WW2 era was based on the notion that you had a job to do, and you devoted your time to tasks that contributed to getting it done; there was some overhead, but it was of minor impact. If you had a reasonably interesting job – and many knowledge workers did, then as now – you came to the office in the morning, spent the day doing it, and went home to a quiet evening. There was some communication – there were messages that came in reusable brown interoffice envelopes, a smattering of external mail, and of course the telephone. But this took a couple of hours every week, not the 20 hours that email consumes today. It certainly didn't conspire to overload people away from their real work, as the 30% of totally unnecessary email does now.

The outcome is rarely articulated explicitly, but I've heard it from others, and can attest to it from my own years in the cube farm: the very experience of corporate work these days has a component of stress and unhappiness that had not been there before 1990.

The aforementioned Reuters survey reflected this too, finding that two out of three respondents associate information overload with loss of job satisfaction and tension with colleagues.

Family life

The effect on family relationships of both the overload and the constant connectivity is chilling. Not only do parents have much less time to devote to each other and to their children, but even when they are together, the interactions are quite different than before. The most amazing tale I have here is the American engineer who told me he'd bought "Harry Potter" in e-book format, with the intent of doing email on his notebook while reading it to his kid at bedtime. Others have told me how they do "quality time" with their children – sitting together in front of the TV while doing email. Whatever happened to building tree-houses together, or playing ball, or just conversing?

I am not a child psychologist, but I can't see much good coming from the encroachment of email on family time. I refer you to a lovely [article](#) titled "BlackBerry Orphans" in The Wall Street Journal; it describes the reactions of the children themselves to the neglect their parents' email obsession forces them to live with.

Individual health risk

When I was driving IO solutions at Intel we'd run a number of employee surveys to characterize the problem; in a survey in one business unit 40% had responded that e-mail has a negative impact on their stress level, while in another group the figure was 54%.

When we say "negative impact on stress level", we need to consider the health implications. A recent [study](#) by the University of California at Irvine monitored knowledge workers with and without email and found that being cut off from work email significantly reduces objective physiological measures of stress, which in turn decreases the risk of a variety of health problems.

Another mechanism of health damage was pointed out by the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy in the UK, who reported that people now spend so much time after work hours reading email on their handheld devices – over 2 hours a day on average, at home and during commute time – that they risk neck and back problems due to doing so in a poor posture.

Whatever the mechanisms, all this aligns with the observation of the managers surveyed by Reuters, 42% of whom attributed ill health to their exposure to information overload. And of course, if they really fall ill – as in staying home in bed – they certainly continue to process email from there, rather than take the deep rest that would restore them to health sooner.

Putting it all together

What all this tells us is that Information Overload, in addition to making employees ineffective at work, is also destroying their enjoyment, health and satisfaction in life. I'm sure you can figure out how this is also bad for the enterprise's bottom line, and draw your conclusions – if you're an employer or manager – as to what you should do about it. [Read my blog](#) if you need ideas.

A good summary insight comes from a [survey of UK employees](#) where temporary employees reported better well-being, general health, more positive attitude towards work and better work behavior (e.g. less absenteeism) than their permanent counterparts. The results mirrored those from others surveys conducted in several other European countries. How come? The researchers observe:

"A possible explanation lies in the deterioration of permanent jobs. Many permanent workers report high levels of **work overload**, relatively high levels of irritation, anxiety and depression and a strong **interference of work with life at home**. Temporary work may have drawbacks; but for many people in permanent contracts, **the experience of work is markedly more negative**".

I rest my case.

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.

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