How to Launch an Information Overload Program in Your Company

Insight from Nathan Zeldes, Aug. 29, 2013

By now practically everybody acknowledges that information overload is a serious problem, and I find myself lecturing about the problem and its solutions in venues as varied as conferences, hi-tech and low-tech companies, government organizations and more. However, while everybody seems to enjoy these lectures, and many take away ideas and techniques they put to good use to improve their own productivity, only a fraction of organizations take the next step and implement a complete action program to solve information overload across their workforce. This is perhaps understandable – the required effort is by no means trivial – but it is also a pity, because the potential ROI is massive indeed (the problem costs employees, as research shows, about one wasted workday every week).

Here I discuss how a company can deploy and lead a structured program to battle information overload, something I've helped a number of them do over the years. This refers to a company (or any organization, for that matter) of a few hundred to a few thousand employees; larger organizations can use the same concepts, but I advise them to apply them separately to smaller subgroups.

The challenge and the decision

For the purpose of this article I define Information Overload (IO) as the combination of Email Overload and Interruptions from incoming messages and alerts of all kinds. I've discussed the heavy damage done by these in a series of earlier insight articles, and will not reiterate it here. The reward for solving this problem is great, but to address it in full you need an organization-wide solution, because email by its nature is a communication tool, and thus involves all the coworkers exchanging the messages and interruptions with each other.

The trigger for a solution effort is usually some senior manager having the realization that things just can't go on the way they are. I've seen this insight come to CEOs and VPs, who often suffer more overload than anyone else. I've also seen such executives wanting to change the way things are and failing to so much as change the behavior of their direct reports: IO is a complex problem and its solution requires more than just a handed-down decision. On the other hand, a managerial decision is a critical first step, and its absence can kill any solution program; if it isn't there, someone – a change agent lower in the hierarchy – will need to lead management to make the decision, as I had while I was driving this matter at Intel.

So say you're a senior manager and you've decided to do something about IO. What next?

Preparations

It is a good idea to first run a pre-survey in the affected group, collecting quantitative data about the impact of IO and qualitative opinions about the relative severity of its various causes and manifestations. This is a good way to signal to your employees that you've decided to tackle this problem, to engage them from the start, and to get some insight into priorities – what mechanisms are causing the most damage, and thus merit the most attention.

This is also the time to engage someone to provide professional support for the program. While any such program relies on leadership by the group's management, these managers are always busy and rarely knowledgeable about the extensive research and know-how that can seed a successful program. What is needed is either an external consultant specializing in Information Overload and workplace communications, or an internal communications specialist with the skills required for this sort of intervention (if the latter, here are some resources they might use). During my career I've served in both roles, first as an internal change agent at Intel, then as a consultant to other companies; the role is similar in both cases.

Stage 1: Bringing the staff on board

The management staff of the company or group must be recruited to lead the program, and their full buy-in is a prerequisite to its success. The way I usually recommend this be done is by devoting a special session in staff – two hours usually suffice – to discuss the problem and decide on next steps. This is the process I call a "Jump Start", which I describe here.

To bring managers up to speed, I start this session with a presentation of the IO problem in its organizational context, its impact, root causes, and a representative sample of solution directions tried elsewhere. With this basis, we can launch into a discussion, which can be guided by the data collected in the pre-survey.

The outcome can vary not only based on the course of the discussion, but also depending on how much the company or group is planning to invest in solving the problem, which is usually decided by the manager initiating the process. No sense discussing a 12-month culture change program if there is no funding or bandwidth for more than a couple of employee lectures; the plan must be tailored for the level of investment desired. Typical outcomes I see in these sessions can be:

- A decision to expose all employees to a lecture and some guidelines, in the hope of triggering a change.
- A list of specific tactics and behavior expectations, to be adopted by the attendees and communicated by them to their departments.
- Appointment of a task force, comprising some of the managers present and others, to create detailed solution plans and lead them to completion over the next months.

Every such plan will bear some fruits, more of them if the available bandwidth permits a deeper process of analysis and planning. In the next sections I describe how you would proceed in this case.

Stage 2: Program definition

If the staff has authorized a full solution program, it is necessary to define a management structure to lead it. This comes naturally to most companies; typically a task force or core team will be appointed, with a team leader, a staff sponsor, and members from the different groups involved (at a minimum, IT, HR and Training). The team leader should have the experience and stature to drive such a complex change, but should not be too senior to have the time to devote to it.

Armed with the pre-survey data, the core team will need to meet – a number of times – to identify any additional data collection required (I recommend a few in-depth interviews with a representative sample of users), and to prioritize causes and define what to do about them. This is where the external or internal consultant comes in – their knowledge of the underlying causes, the available solutions, and how these fared in other companies, can save a lot of grief later on.

The outcome of this stage is usually a solution plan including revised behavior norms, training (whether frontal or web based), some software tools (or tweaks to the existing ones), and a communication campaign for getting all this across to the employee base and ensuring optimal adoption. The plan will typically require presentation to, and approval of, the management staff under whose charter the team had been acting.

Stage 3: Pilot and Deployment

With a plan in place, it is next time to implement it – which is best done with a pilot in a single department or location. This will allow detection of any required changes to the plan, notably to adapt it to unforeseen interactions with company culture and existing work processes. Such a pilot should ideally run for six months, the time it takes to identify behavior effects. The core team needs to track the pilot carefully; a mid-survey after two months, in order to catch early any required course changes, and a post-survey at the end of the pilot, are usually indicated.

After the pilot is done and analyzed it is time for providing a summary and recommendations to the staff; if all went well, a full-scale deployment can be approved. By then the experience gained will allow the core team to effect a smooth deployment and to disband, after transitioning the program into sustaining mode.

Stage 4: Sustaining and continuous improvement

By its very nature, an IO drive needs to be sustained. With people coming and going, the initial impact can be lost in the course of a year or two, unless care is taken to maintain it. Such sustaining can involve a number of components:

- **Ownership:** some group needs to be assigned to sustaining the desired state. This can be in HR, Training, or possibly (though less likely) some part of IT.
- **Standardization:** any best practices, norms and expectations verified in the pilot need to be formally documented in appropriate policies and procedures.
- **Onboarding:** The norms and skills taught during the program must be added to the new hire (onboarding) training process, to ensure they aren't diluted with turnover.
- **Continuous improvement:** The owning group must keep an eye on developments over time, and react to evolving needs. Re-surveying and sensing once or twice a year will help in this (for instance, the subject of IO and communication effectiveness can be included in the annual Organizational Health survey that some companies have). The matter should also be subjected to an annual review cycle by the company's senior management staff.

What *you* can do about this

As a senior manager, you can do what a growing number of your peers have been doing in recent years – make the decision to eliminate Information Overload, assign the required resources, and put the kind of process described above into motion in the group or company you manage.

If you aren't the boss, you can still kick such a process into motion, working as a change agent. To do that, you will need to develop a business case, recruit the support of senior management, and strive to get appointed to lead the change.

There is by now a large body of knowledge about the subject, and there are consultants you can call on, who specialize in this field, in many countries. If you need pointers, just ask me.

Nathan Zeldes has been leading improvement of knowledge worker effectiveness for 18 years, at Intel and for other companies. He's exchanged knowledge with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now advises managers on improving their groups' results through improved tools and work processes.

For more insight articles on Knowledge Worker Productivity, see here. You may also want to check out Nathan's blog at www.nathanzeldes.com, and consider subscribing to his RSS feed and to his Newsletter on that site.