HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN INFORMATION OVERLOAD IS COSTING YOUR ORGANIZATION? 5 REVEALING SYMPTOMS AND HOW TO REACT

SYMPTOM 1: PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

This is the easiest to spot and consider. When you walk through the corridors and see desks, chairs and even the floor occupied with paper piles, your organization has a problem. The impression on visitors and new employees will be a negative one, reflecting a poor image of the organization. When employees have more information coming into their offices than they have time to read, organize, react to, pass on or throw out, something is not functioning properly. Space is costly and employees need adequate space for their work. The psychological effect of being physically inundated with more information than can be digested can be revealed in numerous ways, not the least of which is feelings of inadequacy, loss of control, powerlessness, and even despair. Any one of these feeling can impair job performance due to the anxiety of not being able to cope. Because the evidence is present on a daily basis, it will be hard for the conscientious employee to ignore. The author has been in organizations where office after office had piles of paper falling from desks and toppling piles on the floors. Other realities of this situation are revealed under Symptom 3.

Solution: A knowledge audit of information resources to determine what does come in, what is created internally, and how both flow within the organization is a crucial beginning. The audit should identify all types of information by category, media type (it is likely that besides paper there is a similar cache of electronic PC files). Identifying key employees and high performers, who may or may not have paper overload in evidence, and interviewing them can contribute valuable insights into what resources are essential, important, valuable, of peripheral interest, marginal and useless. Their observations and advice may then form the basis of a plan for managing document flow. Those individuals, who themselves have mastered the management of information flow in and out of their offices, contribute value by sharing "best practice ideas" for the rest to follow.

SYMPTOM 2: BEHAVIORAL EVIDENCE

The first symptom describes some of the behaviors employees may exhibit in their own realm when surrounded by a mass of physical documents.

In addition, it is noteworthy when employees routinely:

- Miss deadlines
- Don't respond to requests for feedback on memoranda or reports
- Fail to pass on critical routed materials
- Are unaware of important information disseminated throughout the organization
- Show lack of currency in their areas of expertise

Solution: Establish clear performance requirements for meeting expectations in each of these areas. When performance reviews are given, employees should be rated in each area. When they offer excuses that point to information overload or inability to be able to "keep up," supervisors must make a conscious effort to understand the validity of reasons offered, and work with the employee and other managers to find solutions that help the entire organization cope with information overload. This may involve hiring professional "information gatekeepers" to receive, evaluate, and disseminate information appropriately to those who need it most. This professional may also predigest or create synopses of incoming resources to enable information consuming employees to be more selective about the full documents, journals, or books they actually need to see.

SYMPTOM 3: REDUNDANT PROJECTS; REPEATING PREVIOUS WORK

Some of the most wasteful examples showing that organizations are in information overload are redundant efforts in certain areas while other necessary operations are neglected for lack of staff resources. We all know of examples in government, large bureaucratic organizations, and rapidly growing companies showing multiple groups tackling the same project, research or processes. It is common in these circumstances to find little awareness among managers and project workers that this is occurring. R & D organizations that attempt to secure patents on work carried out over months or years, only to find existing patents already issued, may have been too overwhelmed with information to have properly identified prior art work in their field. Or, they may have tried to do this important literature research and failed; the failure may be due to the resulting volume, coupled with and time pressures created by management to move too quickly to the next stage.

Solution: Strong awareness of all the workings of the organization at the top is a critical step in guarding against these wasteful mistakes. Whether work within an organization is redundant, repeated unnecessarily, or if the outcomes replicate products already on the market by competitors, clearly waste has occurred. No organization can sustain growth, success, or operate with professional efficiency by routinely repeating these practices.

When management is too involved in other matters to not know specifically what each department is tasked to perform, the entire enterprise is at risk. Information sharing is one of the most essential activities that can create a safeguard against this result. All levels should report, in writing, monthly to their direct supervisors the work they have completed, their current work, problem areas, and any planned work. Managers should then present summaries of the work of subordinates' reports up the chain of command, where redundant efforts will be evident to observant managers. Using the information in these reports must be a top information sharing priority.

SYMPTOM 4: CONSEQUENTIAL EVIDENCE

When supporting documents can't be produced to meet FDA requirements for a new drug filing, or when directors on boards can't find internal material that helps explain strategic directions the company is asking them to back, lack of accessible information may be the result of too much information. When auditors can't find records to support accounting reports, or when chronic litigation engulfs an organization, which it habitually loses, there may have been too little attention paid to insuring retrievability of the information that was there. When drug filings fail or stall due to lack of evidence, directors fail to act in a timely manner, auditors are forced to make disclaimers on behalf of clients due to lack of backup information, or when companies are consumed in lawsuits they can't defend, the consequences are on a track to being devastating.

<u>Solution</u>: All organization must have policies and process practices to insure that their most vital legal and management practices have documentation to support each area of effort. Not only that but the documents must be stored, categorized and in a format that is easily retrieved. The documents must also meet the format requirements (e. g. PDF, paper) of the requesting agency or institution. Clear records retention and destruction policies and enforced practices are just as essential. For this effort, an information specialist with records management training, whose

responsibility it is to keep the process in operation and in compliance, is insurance no large organization can function without. Certification and standards for special areas of compliance exist. Skills and standards are applicable to a job function that has responsibility for managing information to support legal or regulatory compliance; human resources must be made aware of these competencies for hiring purposes.

Finally, new initiatives require vetting through a management team reflecting all the business units of the organization. Overlap becomes evident immediately and where changes are needed, decisions about participating groups can be made before steps are unnecessarily duplicated. At the core of each new initiative must be a "knowledge research expert" whose primary responsibility is to discover and recover prior internal and published information on which any new initiative can be built.

SYMPTOM 5: FAILING TO KNOW KEY FACTS IN YOUR AREAS OF EXPERTISE

New and unique ideas are the driving force of economic growth and organizational re-engineering. It is not unusual to have innovative ideas stimulated by exposure to the work of others, through observation, listening or reading. However, the flood of information to which most of us are exposed, can quickly be buried in the subconscious as non-attributable thoughts and ideas. The ability of humans to keep all the information to which we are exposed, personally categorized and retrievable without a support system (either human or automated), is sorely tested with every news story, magazine, bulletin or broadcast we encounter.

Much of the consolidation that occurs as industries mature, results from the fact that some of the companies had nothing new, novel or unique to offer. Claims are made and money is raised on the basis of having something that no one else has done. If competition already exists, unknown to investors and key employees, serious effort and resources will be wasted. Similarly, managers in dysfunctional operations are often pressed to reorganize or re-engineer, then leap to action without investigating the best practices of others in like situations.

Solution: Both situations can be remedied with good information. Either new product development or re-engineering mandates information sleuths, researchers, and information analysts to systematically and accurately find, gather and prioritize from the mountains of possible resources that material which will guide the best and smartest practices.

SUMMARY

Here we have described five symptoms that are common to business, government and academic research institutions where each one is an information overload problem. Each symptom can be linked to a breakdown in an institution's ability to manage the identification, acquisition, flow, and appropriate use of information. Each circumstance requires three key actions:

- Elevation by management to a priority problem to be solved
- Policies and practices surrounding the required information, which management enforces without equivocation
- Professionally competent information personnel to be responsible for process implementation, and identification and dissemination of information content

Organizations that face up to their information overload condition can take practical, often low-cost, steps for dealing with it, and benefit substantially in the process.
- Lynda W. Moulton, September, 2002

RELATED READINGS OF INTEREST

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