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ANDREA COOMBES' WAYS AND MEANS



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Are we overwhelmed yet?

Workers face huge influx of information, but they're on their own in dealing with it

By Andrea Coombes, MarketWatch

SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) -- Ever feel like you need a break from work just to get your work done? You're not alone.

Every day, information workers in the U.S. -- who comprise an estimated 63% of the workforce -- are each bombarded with 1.6 gigabytes of information, on average, through emails, reports, blogs, text messages, calls and more, according to preliminary data from a report coming later this year.



Reuters

"You're exposed to this fire hose of information," said Roger Bohn, a professor of management at UC San Diego and a co-author of the upcoming report, an update and expansion of the 2003 "How Much Information?" report.

"Your capacity to drink is the same as it always was, but there's a bigger puddle around you when you're done of stuff you weren't able to assimilate," Bohn said.

Couple the wealth of information with the frequency of interruptions at work -- Bohn cited separate research that found workers switch tasks every 2 to 3 minutes on average -- and there's no question information overload is a reality for some people.

"The more often you're interrupted, the less you're able to get done in a period of time," Bohn said. "That leads to a perfectly legitimate feeling that you can't assimilate all the stuff you're doing because the phone keeps ringing or the text message keeps dinging."

Consider this: IBM's 400,000 employees send 12 million instant messages to each other per day, said John Rooney, program manager in the office of IBM's chief information officer.

The effects of information overload are difficult to measure, but Basex, a research and consulting firm, estimates U.S. firms sacrifice \$900 billion a year in lost productivity, with the average knowledge worker -- from computer programmers and rocket scientists to administrative assistants and accounting clerks -- spending about 25% of their day searching for needed information, getting back to work after an interruption and dealing with other information-overload effects.

Companies are starting to look for solutions -- Basex is a member of the Information Overload Research Group, formed in 2008 by tech firms and researchers to study the problem -- but some experts say relatively few companies deal with the issue or help their employees do so. (Basex.com has a tool companies can use to assess how much money they're losing as a result of information overload.)

"The worry is there, no doubt," said Michael Rudnick, a global practice leader at consulting firm Watson Wyatt. "The challenge is that ... the solution is behavioral," he said. "That takes time and lot of patience." Plus, he said, many companies don't have a department specifically responsible for the issue.

It's O.K. to send less

One thing companies could do: Tell employees their productivity isn't measured in number of emails sent. Currently, "people need to maintain a certain communication noise level to keep up with everyone else," said Tony Wright, founder of Seattle-based RescueTime, maker of a tool that measures how people manage their computer time.

That's a cultural problem "that businesses need to attack," Wright said. "It's honestly lazy management, in my opinion, to let that be part of your culture."

At his company, they've shifted instant messages to a site workers visit, rather than letting messages pop up. "I can go and check what the instant-message conversation has been but there's no expectation that I'm in there all the time and responding instantly," Wright said. "If someone needs my attention, they need to make a phone call or knock on the door," he said.

That promotes a culture where "people limit their communication to more meaningful or truly immediate stuff and don't communicate on impulse quite as much," Wright said.

Others agreed. "Obviously instant messaging has the potential to be both an enabler and a disruption in an individuals' work environment," Rooney of IBM said. "Providing tips to help you manage that is really critical."

One tip IBM tells its workers: If the instant-message exchange is likely to take 10 minutes or more, pick up the phone.

Take control

Reclaiming a sense of control over the information flow can help ease the sense of overload. For example, IBM encourages workers to use internal social-networking tools, including shared Web pages known as wikis, to work with colleagues on projects.

"When we primarily interact through our inbox, we're not really in control of the information that comes to us. It's the information that the people who are sending email to us believe is important," Rooney said. "In using social software and tools like that, we're able to direct more of our attention to the information that's most important to us."

Also, set up alerts and feeds from disparate sources, based on keywords that matter to you. "You're able to aggregate content ... according to the preferences you have for information," Rooney said.

Of course, that means more email, so set up auto-route rules on messages to direct them to specific folders you check only when needed. (Route messages based on sender, subject, or sent-to if you're on an email group. In Microsoft Outlook, right-click the message and use the "create rule" feature.)

IBM also advises workers to post an instant-message "do not disturb" sign when they need uninterrupted time.

That's important, said Julie Morgenstern of Julie Morgenstern Enterprises, a business-productivity consulting firm. "Organize your day into blocks of time that are quiet, focused work, where you're not checking email," she said. Otherwise, "your job is just a reaction job and there's no time for the proactive."

Morgenstern also advises workers against checking email first thing in the morning. Focus on an important project instead. [See related story for more tips.](#)

When you do check email, figure out what each message means to you and deal with it accordingly -- ignoring messages contributes to a sense of overload, said Kelly Forrister, vice president of interactive learning at David Allen Co., a productivity consulting firm and promoter of the "Getting Things Done" process.

One idea, she said: Apply the "4-D" rule. If you can deal with the email in two minutes or less, do it and delete it (or do it and file it). If not, delegate the task to someone else, or defer it. If you defer, move the message to an "action" folder or to-do list that you revisit regularly, or to a "waiting" folder where items can be deleted once a temporary issue is resolved.

More tips

- **Send less email, receive less.** "The more you send, the more you get," said Mike Song, a productivity expert and co-author of "The Hamster Revolution: Manage Your Email Before it Manages You."
- **Reduce word count.** Sending concise email messages with clear subject lines will help avoid information overload for your recipient. It will also reduce the likelihood of follow-up emails seeking clarification.
- **Put necessary tasks first.** "There's nothing more frustrating than getting an email that you're not sure what to do with. If there's an action associated with it, put one sentence at the top of your message," Song said.
- **Sort your inbox by sender.** "If I have seven things from my supervisor in there I might create a simple summary" in one reply message, Song said.
- **Don't "reply all" unless absolutely necessary.**
- **Send "thank you" notes judiciously.** And don't "reply all" for those.
- **Turn off "new email" alerts to reduce interruptions.** (In Outlook, go to tools, options, preferences, email options, advanced email options and uncheck everything under "when new items arrive in my inbox.")
- **Cancel "new mail" alert on your desktop.** (In Windows, right-click on the Outlook icon near where the time displays; uncheck "show new email desktop alert.")



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