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Information Anxiety...



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In 2004, as a Director of Knowledge Management at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa, he accepted an Associate Professorship at Minot State University, retiring at the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.

INDIAN PC Magazine interacted with John Girard at the 'Content to Intent', a Knowledge Summit in Bangalore in January , 2009, conducted by the 'International School of Information Management' and the Bangalore Chamber of Industry and Commerce to get a sense on the information anxiousness. Get aligned with his views on the information anxiety quotient existent in Organizations across Canada and the USA.

The genesis of a recent project was the belief that the downsizing, rightsizing or whatever the politically correct euphemism for events during the late 20th century created an environment in which many middle managers were having difficulty dealing with the increasing volume of information. Some might argue that downsizing exercises of the 1990's are history and not of much interest today. We would argue the opposite. It seems very plausible that in the next few years we may witness similar, possibly hasted or poorly planned, reorganizations in an attempt to deal with the global economic challenges ahead of us. We think there are many lessons to be learned for the 1990s, one of which surrounds information anxiety. Information overload will continue to be one of the major menaces confronting middle managers in this new millennium. Some gurus suggest there is more to the information tribulations of the new era than simply overload. The term overload seems to imply that limiting the quantity of information will solve the problem. Increasingly, research indicates that there are other information challenges with even greater impact. The collective noun for this group of challenges is Information Anxiety.

Contrary to popular belief, information overload is not the issue that should concern executives. As it turns out, the middle managers are far more concerned about something else. They are concerned about a more debilitating ailment entitled Accessing Information. In this case, accessing information has nothing to do with Access to Information legislation but rather with a component of Information Anxiety first described by Richard Wurman nearly two decades ago. Neither information overload nor the study of the subject is new. According to David Bawden, more than 245 academic papers were produced on the subject between 1972 and 2000. Predictably, despite the vast quantity of research, there is not a single accepted definition for information overload. In fact, there is even debate about the best term to use. Many suggest information overload whilst others recommend terms such as information anxiety and cognitive overload. Despite the variety of labels and characterizations, there are a number of recurring themes.

One view of information overload considers input to a system and whether that exceeds its processing capacity. This definition assumes that quantity alone is the concern and therefore does not consider if the quality of information is relevant to the problem. David Bawden wrote, "information overload is that state in which available, and potentially useful, information is a hindrance rather than a help." In other words, Bawden widened the scope of the definition by suggesting that relevance may be an important factor.

Tom Wilson added value to the debate by including two additional factors. First, he divides the problem into two parts, a personal problem, and an organizational problem. Second, he introduces the concept of perception to the definition. In other words, the decision if a problem exists or not lies with the affected person or organization. Wilson defines personal information overload as "a perception on the part of the individual (or observers of that person) that the flow of information associated with work tasks is greater than can be managed effectively." Wilson adds organizational information overload is "a situation in which the extent of perceived information overload is sufficiently widespread within an organization as to reduce the overall effectiveness of management operations."

Others broaden the scope even further by dealing with issues of infrastructure and the uncertainty surrounding the existence of a particular piece of information. For example, in his book Information Anxiety, Richard Wurman defined Information Anxiety as "the black hole between data and knowledge. It happens when information doesn't tell us what we want or need to know." David Kirsh discussed four causes of cognitive overload, which are too much information supply, too much information demand, the need to deal with multi-tasking and interruption, and the inadequate workplace infrastructure to help reduce metacognition. Wurman introduced a novel notion whilst describing information anxiety by stating, "Information anxiety can afflict us at any level and is as likely to result from too much information as too little information." This concept is fundamental to comprehend, as many researchers focus entirely on the idea of information overload and thus infer that the only challenge is too much information. Wurman notes that a major cause of information anxiety is the uncertainty surrounding the existence of a particular piece of information.

Based on recent knowledge management studies these wider characterizations appear more appropriate. For example, the authors of Gartner Research's Information Overload Survey concluded there are four information issues affecting competition: siloed information; too much information; unindexed information; and ineffective searching procedures. In a second report, Gartner research Linden suggests there are seven drivers of information overload: quantity; relevance; redundancy; information illiteracy; unqualified information; distraction by the obvious and the glossy; and business models struggling.

The consideration of the wider classification of this information challenge is more pertinent than one focused solely on some of the narrow definitions provided. The latter implies a technological solution to reduce the quantity of information, perhaps by eliminating duplicate data. This may ease the size of the problem and may well be a part of the ultimate solution; however, the challenge is more complex and not merely an issue of quantity. Research underscores other associated concerns, which from a management point of view are equally important. For example, simply reducing the quantity of information will do nothing to assist in Wurman and Kirsh's concerns of not knowing where to find information. The five components of information anxiety according to Wurman are:

1. Not understanding information;
2. Feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information to be understood;

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3. Not knowing if certain information exists;
4. Not knowing where to find information; and
5. Knowing exactly where to find the information, but not having the key to access it.

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As it turns out, in our research middle managers reported Accessing Information, Wurman's latter category, as the most troubling component of Information Anxiety. Middle managers reported levels for this component were statistically higher than either Understanding Information or Information Overload. Of course, some cases of this problem are simply unfortunate oversights; perhaps a manager knows that a document exists, but it is in a locked filing cabinet and neither the key nor the combination is available. Organizationally, this is quite minor because we can always change policies to ensure managers have access.

But, what if the barriers are deliberate? Deliberate barriers, which do exist, are far more serious and much more difficult to change. This is what keeps managers awake at night. In fact, this is a management failure of the highest magnitude and should serve as a clear wake-up call to organizational leaders. Middle managers must have immediate and unobstructed access to the information they require to perform their tasks. The dismantling of these pointless barricades to accessing this goldmine of information is within the gift of management. There are few, if any, technological, legal, or organizational reasons to sanction these obstacles.

Regrettably, anecdotal evidence suggests the root of these obstacles is an environment of mistrust. If senior executives would only trust their middle managers, who are the custodians of this organizational treasure, to access the information they deem necessary the problem would undoubtedly vanish. Even though a stroke of a pen would solve this issue, there seems to be continued reluctance on the part of executives to do so.

Although accessing information was reported by middle managers as the most important issue, two others are worthy of note. Two other information challenges were rated as at least as significant. The first is Information Exists (defined as not knowing if information exists) and the second was Finding Information (defined as not knowing where to find information). Executives should pay attention to these troubling findings. They should acknowledge the breadth and depth of the problem and then develop a strategy to improve the situation. These three concerns share a common origin – the need for middle managers to have access to information they need to perform their tasks. Firstly, they cannot access what they need to know. Secondly, the managers do not know if information exists and thirdly they do not know where to find the information. This is the essence of knowledge management - ensuring that those who have the need to know do in fact know what they need to know and where to get it.

Finally, a caveat is in order. To date all of this research has been completed in Canada and the USA. At present, it is neither possible nor advisable to assume the same challenges exist in India. Adapted from the new book, **The Leader's Guide to Knowledge Management: Drawing on the Past to Enhance Future Performance** to be published in May 2009 by Business Expert Press.

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