



LET MANAGERS SLEEP

"WHAT KEEPS YOU AWAKE AT NIGHT?" IS A QUESTION CONSULTANTS HAVE BEEN ASKING EXECUTIVES FOR YEARS. THE ANSWER OFTEN GUIDES THE CONSULTANT TO THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM – BUT IT DOESN'T ALWAYS WORK. ONE GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVE REPLIED, "MY DOG KEEPS ME AWAKE AT NIGHT." AT FIRST I WAS TAKEN BACK. I THOUGHT HE MUST BE KIDDING, BUT HE WASN'T.

cern public executives. As it turns out, middle managers are far more concerned about something else, a more debilitating ailment – Accessing Information. Not to be confused with access to information acts, it is a component of Information Anxiety first described by Richard Wurman 15 years ago.

Have you wondered what keeps public sector middle managers awake at night? What issues create anxiety across this vital group? A recent Canadian research project was designed to answer the question: Does knowledge create value in government? Specifically, do some types of middle managers report lower levels of information anxiety as a result of knowledge management? Middle managers were defined as the three levels below executive, the feeder group that will fill the executive ranks in the coming years.



The genesis of the project was the belief that the downsizing, rightsizing or whatever the politically correct euphemism for layoffs during the 1990s, created an environment in which many middle managers were having difficulty dealing with the increasing volume of information in government. Dr Nick Bontis of McMaster University eloquently reminds us that the total accumulated codified database of world will double twice a day by 2010. He creates the tongue-in-cheek image of people waking daily knowing half of what they knew the day before.

If this is true, then information overload might be the major menace confronting middle managers in this new

millennium – but perhaps not. 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 con-

According to Wurman, Information Anxiety is “the black hole between data and knowledge. It happens when information doesn’t tell us what we want or need to know.” He argued that there are five components of information anxiety: not understanding information; feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information to be understood; not knowing if certain information exists; not knowing where to find information; and access – knowing where to find the information, but not having the key to get at it.

Middle managers report Accessing Information is the most troubling component of Information Anxiety – statistically significantly higher than 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 the key is not 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 government leaders. Public service middle managers must have immediate and unobstructed access to the information they require to perform their duty to the citizenry. The dismantling of the 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.

Stories people tell us suggest the root of these obstacles is an environment of mistrust. If top management would only trust middle management 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.

Two other mid-management concerns are worth noting. The first is Information Exists? (defined as not knowing if information exists) and the second is Finding Infor-

mation? (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 – mid-managers need to have access to information to perform their tasks. First, they cannot always access what they need to know. Second, they don't always know if information exists and third, they do not know where to find the information. This is

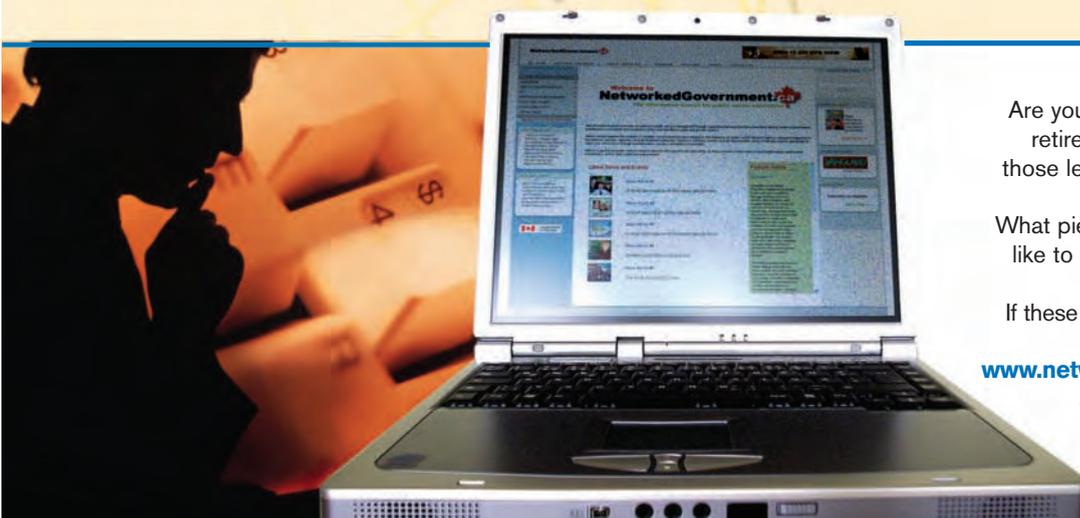


the essence of knowledge management – ensuring that those who have the need to know, do in fact know what they need to know and where to get it.

The good news is that it is not too late to defeat these menaces. However, leaders must develop and implement a knowledge strategy to overcome these challenges. Though such an undertaking requires resources, the investment pales in comparison with the consequences of doing nothing. Let's solve mid-manager's insomnia. They are the future of the public service and they need a good night's sleep.

Dr. John Girard served for 24 years as an officer in the Canadian Forces. He is an associate professor of Business Administration and Business Information Technology at Minot State University. He is researching the relationships between information anxiety, organizational memory loss, and contemporary knowledge management theories. For more information, contact john@johngirard.net or visit www.johngirard.net.

NetworkedGovernment.ca **HAVE YOUR SAY!**



Are you going to be part of the retirement tsunami, or one of those left on the shore after the wave has passed? What piece of advice would you like to give to your supervisor?

If these are questions you would like to answer, then visit www.networkedgovernment.ca and respond to our short on-line survey.

What do you want from your employer?




Canadian Government Executive Magazine and IBM Consulting are partnering to listen to our readers, to understand your thoughts and feelings about these important topics. Look for the results in an upcoming issue.